Thirty years ago, when Mike Gass came to UNH from Maryland to interview for a proposed outdoor education teaching position, he did so by bicycle—with a group of college students in tow.

“I was teaching at Towson University, and my UNH interview seemed like the perfect opportunity for a learning experience,” he recalls.

In Boston, he put the students on a train headed south and continued on to Durham, where he impressed his future colleagues with his ability to translate his love of adventure into learning experiences. Over the past three decades, that gift is one he has shared with countless UNH students, and with groups around the globe.

Starting with one rock-climbing class, Gass is credited with growing the best-regarded and most comprehensive outdoor education program in the world. He is perhaps best known for developing the University’s Browne Center, which brings some 10,000 people each year to Durham to tackle adventure experiences while doing the larger work of interpersonal growth. With several books and a host of awards to his name, he is recognized as a leader in the field of adventure-based learning, which uses novel experiences to create change.

“When you put people in challenging situations with appropriate social support, they typically call upon the ‘true selves’ lying beneath their ‘social selves’ to meet their goals,” he explains. These experiences can be so profound that they can create lasting shifts in behavior.

Gass has created experiential learning programs on every continent except South America in the past 20+ years, working with groups ranging from children in Africa orphaned by AIDS to adolescent boys in Australia to corporate teams and psychotherapists in Taiwan. He has found that the dynamics of adventure learning resonate with a range of people and cultures. Those who have worked with him praise his ability to transcend custom and language and effectively apply what are truly foreign concepts to different groups.

“In every situation, possessing a humble attitude and open mind is critical,” he says. “It’s incredibly rewarding to see different groups take these principles and make them their own.”

—Kristin Duisberg