

PRESS RELEASE on behalf of ANIMAS VALLEY INSTITUTE

Animas Valley Institute has been a trusted leader in outdoor wilderness experiences since 1980. We are relieved to report that a participant who was temporarily unaccounted for during a recent backcountry solo program has been found safe and uninjured. The participant, Gina Chase, demonstrated exceptional resilience and resourcefulness, reflecting the thorough preparation and training provided by our experienced guides.

Experience and Safety First

At the Animas Valley Institute, safety is the cornerstone of our operations. Our programs are led by highly experienced professionals, many of whom have experience in search and rescue and wilderness guiding with decades of experience in challenging terrain. Our safety protocols are robust and include medical screening, risk management training, and the use of appropriate survival gear.

Incident Overview

While the details of the incident are still being gathered, we want to emphasize that our foremost concern is the safety and well-being of our participants. The backcountry is inherently unpredictable, and while we strive to mitigate risks, some level of uncertainty is always present. We are committed to conducting a thorough review of the incident to understand what occurred and to ensure that our protocols continue to prioritize participant safety.

Defining a Backcountry Solo

A backcountry solo, as conducted by the Animas Valley Institute, is a carefully managed and structured experience. Participants are not truly alone; they are situated within a defined and secure area, often resembling a large campground, where they can reflect and connect with nature. The solo sites are strategically selected within a safe distance of our base camp and support staff. Participants are always within a safe distance to ensure quick response in case of emergencies. Our guides are vigilant, and regular check-ins are conducted to monitor the well-being of each participant.

Addressing Concerns

We want to clarify that Gina was not without food or communication tools. She carried a fully functional cell phone with satellite capabilities and activated the SOS function when necessary. In addition to her phone, she was also carrying a pack that contained; rain jacket and pants, insulated jacket, emergency blankets, knife, fire starting supplies, a whistle, laminated emergency instructions, water, personal first aid kit, a flashlight and ground insulation.

Reaffirming Our Commitment to Safety

In our 43 years of operation, Animas Valley Institute has maintained an exemplary safety record, with no fatalities and a strong emphasis on risk management. We have guided thousands of participants through transformative backcountry experiences, always prioritizing

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their safety and well-being. Our programs are designed to challenge participants while ensuring they are fully supported by expert guides and comprehensive safety measures.

Our Philosophy

Our mission is to offer individuals the opportunity to reflect deeply and reconnect with nature, free from the distractions of everyday life. While we provide the option of fasting, it is entirely voluntary and supported by medically screened protocols. Participants are never left unprepared; each carries essential survival equipment and is briefed on safety measures specific to the environment.

Reflective backcountry solos, such as those offered by the Animas Valley Institute, provide a unique opportunity for personal growth and deep reflection. These experiences are carefully designed to balance the benefits of solitude with the necessary precautions to ensure safety. While no backcountry activity is without risk, our protocols are designed to manage and minimize these risks effectively.

Substance-Free Environment

We want to clarify that the Animas Valley Institute does not use, condone, or promote the use of any substances—legal or illegal—during our backcountry programs. Our focus is on providing a safe, supportive environment where participants can engage in deep personal reflection and connection with nature. Any association with substance use is entirely unfounded and contrary to our core values and practices.

Moving Forward

We are committed to learning from every experience and continuously improving our programs. In light of this incident, we will be conducting a thorough external review of our protocols, seeking input from independent experts to ensure we are doing everything possible to protect the safety of our participants. This review will ensure that our practices remain aligned with the highest standards of safety and participant care. Already we have implemented additional protocols to address the gap identified by this incident to provide additional capability to satellite and cellular devices.

We appreciate the trust that our participants place in us, and we remain committed to providing transformative experiences in the wilderness while prioritizing their safety and well-being.

We thank the Sheriff's Office and San Miguel County Search and Rescue for their dedication and service, and we are deeply grateful that Gina is safe. We will continue to work closely with all relevant authorities to maintain the trust and safety of our community.

We will respond to specific questions about this incident once we have received them and provide appropriate written answers when they are available.