I could already picture myself suffering through each workout. On the turf outside of the converted gas station, monster-truck tires stood waiting to be flipped. Inside, through the windows, I could see there were no stair-climbers or ellipticals -- only rowing machines, free weights, and impossibly high jump-boxes.

On the day after Thanksgiving, the most food-indulgent day of the year, I stood in front of John Breen, the head coach of Cadence Fitness, and received the firmest handshake possible. This man was surely all-business/no fun, short and muscular. I was there to erg for crew, and I told him so, but somehow John sensed that there was more to my visit than simply sitting down to row faster. Not even my mom had asked if there was another reason I was there, yet this “all business” coach made it possible for me to be honest, the only true way to open up. A fear of the unknown had always held me back. I both needed and wanted confidence -- and John knew it from the start.

After working out daily with John for a month or so, we had become very close. One week in December, John asked me if I would come to a “special” class on Sunday at two o’clock. It was invitation-only; he usually did not ask people, especially not kids, to join unless he thought they were suitable for the group. I assumed he meant suitable from a physical standpoint. I was wrong. This group was special personality-wise, rather than strength-wise, a mixture of those who were recovering from previous addiction problems, and those who were not. John said I would have no way of knowing which people were which. I have a habit of making and following assumptions, however, and I was convinced that guessing would not be hard.

Again, I was wrong. In AIR - Athletes in Recovery - I could not even begin to figure out the pasts of anyone, and it immediately did not matter to me. I was warmly welcomed into the group and thrown into the workout as if I were a regular in the class. The playlist, comprised of music as diverse as the group, was blaring. Everyone high-fived as they moved from workout station to station. In the background, recent Kanye jumped to hits from the ‘80s, to “music to roller-skate to.” The music matched each of us, and all of us.

At first, I found myself very different from the members of AIR. Of course, there is one obvious difference -- I am easily the youngest there. But now I have been in the group for twelve months. What I have found each Sunday at two o’clock is that while every member is different in some way, we all have a lot of similarities. Kelly, who has a son my age, dances so much that some of our playlist is simply designated “Kelly songs.” If I ever need a hug, or to rant about school, Kelly is my go-to girl. Alisha and Sherrill are married and act as a set of parents, venting to each other, and cracking inside-jokes about John when he is not looking. They were two of the first people who made me feel at home within the group. Then there is John himself, who has made me his “apprentice” -- I am in charge of writing the workouts on the whiteboard, finding the right playlist, and getting groups organized. My initial fears of self-consciously flipping tires outside on the turf melted away with AIR. We are a family, and we laugh together. The confidence that I was looking for? I have gained it in sweat and camaraderie.

Not long ago, John sent me a note with a line from Goethe -- “the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. … Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”  If you had asked me on Thanksgiving a year ago if I would still be committed to brutal workouts, I do not know if I would have said yes, but AIR, and all of my friends and family there, helped me learn to breathe.