

Schoolhouse

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Lost Prairie , Mont. -

On a modest 200-acre ranch here, wild elk roam, maple-maned horses tend to their foals, and chickens cackle near the porch of a rustic log cabin. Surrounded by northwest Montana's endless landscape--with its vast, overgrown valleys, winding trout streams, ancient forest, and snow-capped mountain ranges--this remote retreat was an idyllic setting for the hunting lodge and horse farm that were first built here. It is a paradise ripe for hiking, fishing, skiing, mountain climbing, and other activities sure to satisfy an adventurous spirit.

But to many of the errant teenagers who are coaxed, even dragged, here to Montana Academy by desperate parents or paid escorts, the scene has considerably less appeal. For these young men and women, far removed from the comforts and distractions of their urban and suburban lives, the rims of mountains are as suffocating as the walls of a prison. The seclusion is meant to disorient the emotionally troubled students, ages 14 to 18, who attend this year-round school. Only then can they focus all their energies on the school's intense "emotional growth" curriculum that, unlike many other alternative programs for such youths, places as much emphasis on academics as it does on therapy.

"This was a culture shock," says Sophie, a bright and creative 15-year-old from New York City who arrived here 17 months ago after a suicide attempt. "I'm used to getting my own way. At first, I wanted to escape this place."

Sophie's experience is typical of other adolescents' who come here at various points along the bumpy and seemingly endless road to overcoming their destructive impulses. The serenity of this place, the caring atmosphere, and the limitless possibilities for exploration and reflection are of little consolation to those recovering from depression and drug addictions, trying to make sense of their relationships with parents, or coming to grips with

past abuse and other traumas. For them, life at the edge of the Rocky Mountain wilderness is anything but liberating. Quite the contrary: There are regular searches for drugs and random drug testing; television is rarely permitted; music is censored, computers scarce; letters, phone calls, and e-mail messages to friends and family are restricted; certain clothing is prohibited; and proper behavior is prescribed.

A year or more after their arrival, however, departure can be bittersweet.

In time, many of the students come to appreciate nature's bounty and the inner peace they find here, as reflected in one 15-year-old boy's poetry:

I feel a connection to all things
The trees, the earth, the sky, and moon. Their beauty
and strength exists within me for I am them and they are me.

Most of the 30 or so students gain similar insights during their stay at Montana Academy, which generally lasts 12 to 18 months. And while they may yearn for a reunion with friends and family and for freedom from the school's rigid structure, completing the program brings a greater challenge: fitting back in to the lives they left behind without falling into the same destructive patterns that brought them here in the first place.

"Quite frankly, I'm scared shitless," says 18-year-old Erin, who dreads returning to her hometown in Marin County, Calif., where "everywhere I look reminds me of drugs."

It is a difficult transition, but one made easier by the school's curriculum, designed to push adolescents to take responsibility for their actions and to equip them with new skills for coping with life's challenges and disappointments.

This is where Kat, a fiercely independent 15-year-old bent on living life on her own terms, can finally envision some dreams for her future. That seemed all but impossible to her last year, when her dissatisfaction with school and anger over her parents' divorce sent her spiraling into rebelliousness and drug use.

By the middle of her freshman year at her public high school in Napa, Calif., she had skipped some 70 days of school. Never one to conform, the free-spirited teenager says she resented mundane classes that discouraged individual expression. She felt lost among the school's 2,000 students. After being escorted to one alternative program that she felt didn't appreciate her individuality, she ran away, angrier and more determined to defy her parents.

At Montana Academy, Kat has become a top student, excelling at art and English. She has sold several of her paintings, and has become a mentor to other students. The strained relationships she had with her parents are on the mend. She is on track to earn her diploma next year and eventually go to college.

Kat never thought school could be so enlightening.

“This place has given me a better sense of myself,” she says. “I didn’t have any dreams before. I lived day by day and couldn’t see any future. Now, I want to do something [with my life].”

Kat and her parents say the conversion was fueled, in large part, by the emotional-growth curriculum, which compels students to focus intensely on the sources of their problems, control their behavior, work at developing and repairing relationships with peers and adults, and create plans for the future. All this while they learn new skills and delve seriously into their academic work.

The curriculum--which combines therapy and academics--reflects the underlying philosophy of a growing number of therapeutic schools around the country, according to Lon Woodbury, an education consultant from Bonners Ferry, Idaho, who advises parents on placements for their children, based on his own visits to and assessments of dozens of such schools.

“The generally agreed [upon] definition of emotional growth is the ‘whole child’ educational concept,” says Woodbury. “Not only are these schools dealing with math and English, but more importantly, they are dealing with helping the child grow up and mature.”

Adolescents who turn to drug use or other self-destructive behavior, Woodbury says, generally have trouble discerning the consequences of their actions. “They have to learn what’s right and wrong ... to have boundaries.”

More and more students, he says, are falling into this category, owing to a variety of factors. In a more permissive society in which career-minded parents spend less time with children, and schools and churches have less influence over their emotional and spiritual development than in previous generations, teenagers have more chances to make the wrong choices, Woodbury says. At the same time, more stringent policies against weapons and drugs have contributed to increasing numbers of expulsions from public schools. One result is that many more parents are seeking out private boarding schools that can better address their children’s problems.

A few years ago, John and Carol Santa, two of Montana Academy’s founders, were among them. After numerous attempts at helping their son, Sean, overcome his emotional problems and drug addiction at home, they enrolled him in a therapeutic boarding school in Idaho.

“It was a heart-wrenching decision,” recalls Carol Santa, a longtime teacher and reading specialist. She and her husband, a psychologist who was then in private practice, felt the school was their last hope for helping Sean come to grips with his troubles.

Shortly afterward, it was John Santa and his colleague, John McKinnon, who were forced to look inward and re-evaluate their own lives. They took on the state of Montana over its hotly debated decision to turn over state-supported mental-health services to an East Coast managed-care company. After spending much of their careers creating hospital programs and offering private therapy for adolescents with mental illness and substance-abuse problems, the two anticipated a future in which abbreviated and inadequate care would become the standard.

“It was clear that it would be very hard to find an effective and dignified place to practice medicine,” recalls McKinnon, a Yale University-trained psychiatrist. “I decided the next place I was going to practice, / was going to decide the right treatment for a patient.”

They and their wives started conjuring an ideal scenario for long-term, intensive therapy, outside of a hospital setting, where they could make a real difference in the lives of emotionally troubled teenagers. Talking around the kitchen table, the McKinnons and the Santas realized that ideal wasn’t as far-fetched as it sounded.

Their professional backgrounds were a seemingly perfect match for the venture. All four had worked with adolescents throughout their careers. John McKinnon had worked in several adolescent hospitals, while his wife, Rosemary, a child therapist, had a private practice specializing in issues facing children of divorced couples. John Santa, a clinical psychologist and former college professor, had spent much of his career counseling children. Carol Santa, an educational psychologist on leave from her job as curriculum specialist for the Kalispell, Mont., school district, is the reigning president of the 90,000-member International Reading Association. She is also the creator of Project CRISS--for Creating Independence Through Student-Owned Strategies--a program used in 44 states that helps students learn how to study.

Personal experience with their son’s therapeutic school gave the Santas one model to work from, but they were determined to avoid the flaws they say they saw in that program. While generally happy with the school, they say it discouraged parents from participating fully in their children’s recovery.

That experience led them to include a strong emphasis on family therapy in their vision. At Montana Academy, therapists moderate weekly discussions between parents and children and ask parents to visit the school for face-to-face therapy as often as once a month.

The partners also vowed that academics would not take a back seat.

“The task of adolescence is to learn who you are,” John Santa says. “It’s a mistake to think that school isn’t important to their identity. You can’t say, ‘We’ll just fix them up emotionally, and then they’ll feel good about themselves.’ ”

Such an opinion is hardly universal among other private alternative schools. Many view therapy as the primary objective and believe students can catch up on their schoolwork later. Often parents agree.

“The ultimate goal of the programs is to provide therapeutic value,” says John H. Reddan, the director of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs. He quotes estimates that some 3 million youths, or roughly 10 percent of their age group in the U.S. population, have severe emotional problems. “You find a lot of programs doing very well with therapy and the emotional-growth side, but the academics suffer. But then, young people often feel frustrated when they go back to more traditional classrooms.”

Some of the established schools--such as John Dewey Academy in Great Barrington, Mass., or the Cascade School in Whitmore, Calif.--have earned reputations for paying close attention to both aspects of their programs. Over the past decade, Reddan says, other schools have become more effective at providing both good teaching and counseling.

But parents don't necessarily object when there is an imbalance favoring therapy.

“We chose the school for the therapy because that's what we needed most,” says Barbara, whose son, Ricky, graduated from Montana Academy last year. That therapy, she says, helped Ricky overcome anger that had been festering for years and helped her become a much better parent.

“At that point, you don't really care if they get the schooling or not. They need the therapy.”

Once Ricky was back home, he and his parents were more aware of how important it was for him to maintain his studies, Barbara says. After returning to his competitive public high school in Palo Alto, Calif., Ricky's grades improved dramatically, and his scores on college-entrance exams will allow him to apply to some top universities.

Such private schools have started to organize in order to address the variations in programs. Reddan's group, the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, based in Santa Barbara, Calif., is a network of 65 therapeutic schools that was formed earlier this year. It is drafting guidelines to help distinguish high-quality programs from those that do not meet professional standards. The industry includes both for-profit and nonprofit schools.

“There was a general feeling that the work done by therapeutic schools and programs deserved commendation ... but that some lackluster schools were giving the good programs a bad name,” Reddan says. “There is also a lack of understanding of the kind of work done by quality programs. The profession needed a voice, some structure, and some standards.”

The quality of the programs can run the gamut. While the granddaddies of the industry--such as the 30-year-old CEDU School in Running Springs, Calif.--have proven themselves over time, most such schools have much shorter track records. Some are run by business

professionals with limited backgrounds in therapy or education.

The result, according to some observers, is that a number of programs fail to meet high standards for therapy, for academics, or both. There are also tremendous differences in the programs' approaches and goals for fostering students' mental and emotional growth.

Such variety gives parents a number of choices. For instance, parents unhappy with hospital programs, or the tendency of some medical professionals to prescribe medications before they fully understand a child's history and circumstances, might choose a school where the therapy is informal, conducted by laypersons committed to a self-help philosophy. Other parents believe professionally trained therapists are critical to their children's recovery.

Montana Academy falls into the latter category. Clinically trained therapists and educators lead a staff of two dozen. Everyone, from the chef to the family that manages the ranch, is thoroughly versed in the school's mission and philosophy and involved in mentoring and evaluating students, according to Rick Johnson, the head of school. The entire staff also helps round out the course offerings with classes in horticulture, horsemanship, culinary studies, construction trades, and ranch management.

After learning some lessons the hard way, the 2-year-old Montana Academy is still tweaking its program. Shortly after its opening, the founders realized that students prone to violence and those still actively seeking drugs or alcohol posed a safety risk. Now, students with criminal backgrounds are not accepted. And no one comes here fresh from adjudication.

The bulk of the enrollment is made up of youths who have completed rehabilitation or a wilderness-therapy program--an intensive "survival" course that forces teenagers to take responsibility for themselves or suffer sometimes harsh consequences. For instance, if a youth doesn't pack up his or her tent in time to leave with the group, he or she must leave it behind and do without.

The school has stopped accepting students with serious learning disabilities that might drain precious staff time and resources, although it admits students with attention-deficit disorders. The founders have completely overhauled the program's structure and have gone through a number of staff changes.

But the school's leaders haven't swayed from their commitment to combining a strong therapy program with an equally challenging academic curriculum.

"We want to have a first-rate school," John Santa says.

While still a toddler in the industry, Montana Academy has won fans among those experienced in the field. The McKinnons and the Santas played a pivotal role in the creation of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, joining six other schools

as founding members. And several educational consultants have praised the school's academic program, whose lessons are designed to inspire critical thinking and mastery of subject matter over the memorization of facts.

"I always look at a school's academic component closely," says Susan Edwards, who evaluates dozens of programs before making recommendations to the parents who hire her. "Montana Academy seems to be exceptional in its commitment [to academics]. Unfortunately, parents don't necessarily ask [schools they're considering] for credentials of the teaching staff or the curriculum."

For a recent lesson in Phil Jones' English class, nearly a dozen students in stocking feet, from grades 9 to 12, are studying myths and legends throughout time. The students are asked to write about and discuss myths in their own lives. Following a similar lesson planned for art class, Jones talks about the meaning of images in Native American paintings from the late 18th century. The class then journeys to a nearby nature preserve, where students can get up close to examine still-unstudied pictographs believed to have been left by prehistoric hunters. The students will later give their own interpretations of the pictographs and then paint their own images.

Montana Academy students take two classes at a time for eight-week blocks. The year-round program leaves extra time for them to catch up on credits or pursue subjects of special interest. The schedule allows students to earn nine credits a year, a pace that would enable them to graduate in 2½ years if they stayed that long. Montana Academy also offers a full college-preparatory curriculum and allows advanced students to enroll in classes at the local community college.

Jones is one of three certified teachers, all selected for their skill at teaching students of varying ages, learning styles, and abilities.

School's out at 12:30, just four hours after starting, leaving the rest of the day for therapy, private time, and experience-based workshops. While one group of students spends the afternoon fly fishing, another tunes instruments for a music-appreciation workshop. A few teenagers saddle up for a trail ride.

Other activities have included whitewater rafting, rock climbing, swimming, skiing, and camping.

The outdoor adventures are often new experiences for the students, most of whom come from big cities or surrounding suburbs. But 18-year-old Erik could pass for someone who grew up fly fishing. He stands quietly on the banks of the scenic trout stream here, the silence broken only by the trickle of water and the hypnotic rhythm of his rod in motion.

Not long ago, few who knew him would have imagined this spectacle. Shortly before coming to Montana Academy, Erik was living on the edge in suburban Chicago. A tough-talking troublemaker, he had several scrapes with the police stemming from his heavy involvement with drugs. Failures and absences marred his once-shining report card.

After a year in Montana, he has found a new tempo to his life. He now finds fishing, rock climbing, camping, and hiking far more alluring and addictive than drugs. Moreover, he holds his classmates in check when they act out, and he draws the line when they suggest listening to raunchy music in mixed company.

"I've realized that I can be active and have fun in a different way," he says.

After a hiking trip to Alaska this summer, he plans to start college in the fall.

The casual observer might easily view such outings as simply recreational. But life here is far from fun and games.

Even the most leisurely activities are designed to have some underlying meaning.

"When you are out here, you can't help but slow down and reflect on your life," says Greg Windham, a therapist who leads twice-weekly expeditions to his favorite fishing holes. "But fishing, like all the experientials, is a metaphor for life. You have to set a goal, choose the right path for achieving it, ... and focus on the task. You get frustrated when the line tangles or when the fish you catch fails to meet expectations, but you deal with it and move on."

Those lessons are perhaps the easiest for Montana Academy residents to digest. They must also put in a lot of hard work. Teachers work with students' public schools to ensure that they keep up with their classmates there and to prepare them for Advanced Placement or college-entrance exams.

The teenagers spend much of the rest of their time in therapy--in groups, individually with a therapist, and with members of their families. They also tend to the daily needs of cattle, elk, pigs, horses, and chickens. They wash dishes, do all the yard work, clean bedrooms and bathrooms, repair fences, clear hiking trails, move debris, and even help build the log cabins that provide staff housing.

While traditional grades are given for schoolwork, a much more elaborate system of assessing students' overall progress is followed.

Students must master five phases of development before they can graduate from the program. In addition, high school seniors must meet Montana's graduation requirements to earn a diploma.

The phases, defined by a clan system borrowed from American Indian traditions, combine emotional, social, and academic milestones that signal the student has the mental strength and maturity to advance to the next level and earn more privileges.

The steps are incremental and start with the basics, such as demonstrating honesty and self-discipline and following the rules. Next, the students must calmly identify their feelings about themselves and their families. Students in upper-level clans must forge healthy relationships with other students and adults, including their parents. During the final stage, the youths each create a coherent plan for the future and for sustaining healthy attitudes and behaviors. All along the way, they are required to take their studies seriously and perform according to their abilities.

Teachers and therapists meet once a week or more to talk frankly about which students are meeting, exceeding, or missing the mark.

Plenty of opportunities arise for them to demonstrate growth. The students live in close quarters, although boys' and girls' dorms are positioned at opposite sides of the campus. They are together often: at meals, in class, on field trips, in group therapy, and for Saturday-night movies. Each minute of the day, each action, each word, is a potential gauge of their progress.

Daily challenges, and how they are handled by students and staff members, provide their own measure of Montana Academy's progress. Building and planning the school and its program have been as bumpy as the eight-mile gravel road that leads to this rural valley. Here, the founders say they found the perfect place for helping young men and women reflect and heal. But it was at enormous personal expense that they were able to bring their vision to life.

The McKinnons and the Santas mortgaged their homes for part of the \$600,000 loan to purchase the ranch and build more facilities. Then, on a cold winter day, they led a handful of education specialists on a snowshoe tour of the place--a chance to describe the school's mission and solicit suggestions. The consultants started referring their clients to the school, which now receives at least 25 applications a month; one or two are accepted.

The expense of maintaining such a facility forced the couples to compromise on one part of their goal. Initially, at least, the school must depend on students whose parents can pay the hefty \$3,500 to \$4,800 monthly fees, severely limiting who is accepted. Eventually, they hope the school will turn a profit.

At similar schools, tuition ranges from \$20,000 to \$60,000 a year, or more, some of which may be covered by a parent's health insurance or paid for with special education funding from a student's home school district. A few schools provide scholarships or adjust fees for lower-income families.

Some of Montana Academy's clients have had little trouble plunking down what can amount to more than \$50,000. Others have risked everything on this school--as John and Carol Santa did for their own son.

"In principle, the school [aims to enroll] a cross-section of America, but the reality is that it's very expensive to do," John McKinnon says. All the students are white, many of them from families of considerable means.

But the Santas and McKinnons are working to create a foundation for scholarships to allow for more racial and socioeconomic diversity.

The costs and planning have been much less intimidating than the founders' most daunting task: helping to transform lives.

"We have had moments deeply filled with anguish and worry," says Rosemary McKinnon, who spends hours collecting and analyzing the histories of applicants and their families before making admission recommendations. "This is such a tremendous responsibility. These parents are entrusting you with the most precious thing they have."

That trust creates a list of challenges and responsibilities the school must address: making sure relationships between boys and girls remain platonic, mediating the often volatile relationships between children and parents, and ensuring that students are safe from themselves and others.

When dealing with adolescents with serious emotional problems, even careful monitoring and clearly defined rules can fail. And keeping close contacts with students cannot guarantee that the adults on campus will know all the secrets of teenagers more likely to confide in their inner circle of friends than a therapist.

Earlier this summer, those secrets caught staff members off-guard when one girl made a half-hearted attempt to kill herself. After confiding in a friend about a past sexual assault she had suffered, the secret was revealed. The subsequent rumors, and the resulting name-calling, apparently pushed her over the edge. Students alerted a staff member soon after she swallowed a handful of aspirin. She recovered fully after a few days in the hospital.

The adolescents here are expected to examine such issues in depth. Two community meetings quickly followed the incidents, allowing students to vent their concerns and to express the anger felt for those who contributed to the young woman's suicide attempt.

"It's amazing to me how well those students communicated their outrage over what happened," John Santa says. "These troubled kids were able to express their anger in a very adult way."

Such moments signify to Santa and his partners that they are headed in the right direction. Their work, they say, is rewarded when the transformation of students like Sophie, Kat, Erin, Erik, and Ricky is evident to the staff, their parents, and themselves. When they leave, the conversion generally is clear.

One reward Ricky summed up in his final words to John McKinnon upon graduating from the program: "Thank you for completely changing my life."

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