

VISITS...

SUMMIT PREPARATORY ACADEMY

Kalispell, Montana
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Visit by Larry Stednitz, PhD, September 12, 2007

I first visited Summit Preparatory School five years ago, and as most consultants, I waited for some time before I would entertain referring a student to them. Many consultants are cautious about sending students to new schools because of the difficulty in start-up and the inevitable changes that will occur in the beginning of any program.

Summit Preparatory School is a non-profit therapeutic boarding school outside of Kalispell, Montana, caters to intellectually average to superior boys and girls who are not reaching their potential due to clinical issues impeding their success. When I first visited Summit, I saw what I believe represents the future of these types of programs. The physical plant and land was developed at a cost of seven million dollars and the result is a state of art

residential program for troubled kids. Summit provides individually focused treatment within its consolidated "transformational" model as well as opportunities for extensive involvement in the Kalispell community. Summit employs over 80 full time employees for and generates revenue for their area of Montana, utilizing local services and goods which helps the community remain financially viable. All of this supports the entire community including Summit.

The designs of the buildings were well thought out and all buildings were carefully designed for their purpose, to work effectively with adolescents who need good supervision and ample activities. Ample space was allowed for freedom of movement and at the same time provides excellent ability to monitor students. The school has a great gymnasium with an excellent fitness area, full sized classrooms, an Olympic sized in-door swimming pool, a state of the art kitchen, and comfortable living quarters. Equally important, the school is close to Kalispell, an up and coming small Montana city with ample services that are made available to the students. Additionally, Kalispell is a ski Mecca and is growing rapidly, attracting wealth and sophistication to this part of Montana. Summit is close enough to Kalispell that Summit can attract reliable and well educated staff.

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The school accepts a “fairly” soft student who does not require constant supervision and is not prone to suicidal, assaultive or run-away behaviors. Otherwise, the students have a wide range of diagnoses. All are average to superior intellectually, with a low of 90 on standardized testing. Due to small classroom sizes, Summit can work with students who have mild learning differences. Students are accepted based on their ability to intellectually and socially connect with others.

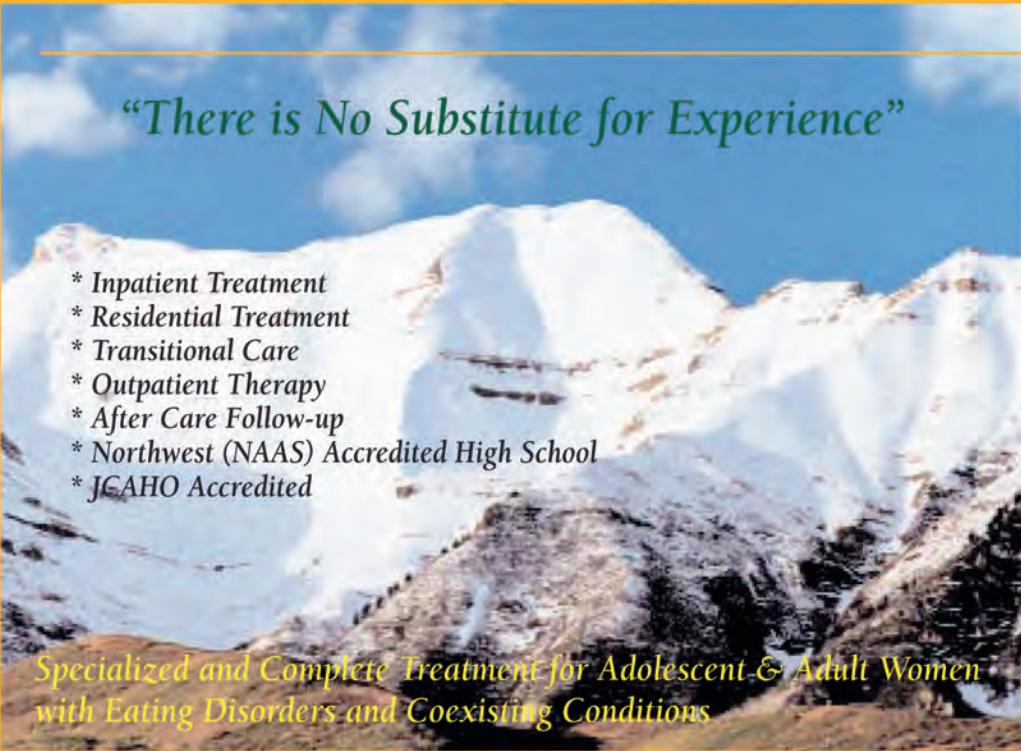
The model of treatment is referred to as a Transformational model which is intended to redirect misbehaviors more effectively and move students up the maturity ladder. Rick Johnson, Executive Director, said that this treatment model is based heavily on the combination of structure and positive relationships. The focus is on relationship development which allows staff to confront misbehaviors more effectively. The school strives for an equal mix which creates an environment of trust, develops close relationships between staff and students, assisting the students in regulating their moods. As time passes, these students are better able to internalize and take on a leadership role supporting newer students or those who are struggling. Relationship building and structure are strongly supported through individual and group

therapies. The Master-level or PhD clinician is the lead person on the team, orchestrating the treatment with guidance from all team members. Summit has a one-to-ten, therapist-to-student ratio.

Another important treatment component is trying to find in a child what excites him or her. To this end, every student is involved in some form of sport or activity at all times. Summit also has a strong emphasis on art and music. These activities are not seen as a “carrot” or reward for good behavior, but a proactive way of engaging the students emotionally and helping them experience positive, hopefully life-long interest in the company of positive mentoring adults. The variety of activities is impressive and the school gives the appearance of being a regular college prep school. The following “clubs” are but a few examples of the rich variety of activities: Video production, fitness, fly fishing, rock climbing, lifeguard training, running, SAT/ACT training, and jazz/choir.

I met with students over lunch and they were very open, communicating well about the school. They were all pleased to be at Summit and felt that the school was helpful to them. We discussed boy/ girl relationships and other issues that would be relevant to any school. They were permitted, in a limited way,

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to acknowledge that they had a girl or boy friend, but of course the school placed clear limits on any physical manifestation of the relationship. The issue became a clinical issue in the event the boy or girl had difficulty handling even this type of relationship. They were open and shared their reasons for being at Summit and discussed the progress that they had made. Across the dining room, it sounded like any normal high school at lunch time.

Because the professional and life experience of a program director tend to dictate how the school is run, Rick and I discussed his background and experience in detail. We first discussed the anomaly of Summit being a not-for-profit school which is unusual in this industry. Eighty percent of the programs west of the Mississippi are for profit. Rick felt that being non-profit allowed him and his staff to focus more directly on the student's needs. There were also other important benefits for Summit including the opportunity for Summit and their Board to apply for and receive an eight million dollar low interest loan supported by the Rural Development entity in Montana through the Department of Agriculture.

Summit is a certified school, accredited by the Office of Instruction through the State of Montana. Because of this certification, the non-profit status allows students from Summit to attend the Montana colleges and universities as residents. It also allows Summit students to compete with other local school districts in athletics and other competitive activities. Currently, Summit students compete in soccer and track and staff expects students to become competitive in swimming as well. Summit Preparatory School is accredited both by the Montana Department of Education and the Northwest Association of Schools; is registered with the State of Montana Board of Private Alternative Adolescent Residential Programs; is a full member of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs; and is a member of the Child Welfare League of America.

To gain a greater understanding of the man in charge of the school, we discussed a few of Rick's previous experiences in the field. Rick and his wife, Jan Johnson, MSW, Associate Director, both graduated from the University of Illinois in Chicago, a well respected school for social work students. Rick's first work in Montana was in Missoula as the Director of St. Patrick's Hospital at the inpatient facility. From there, he was recruited to start Pathways Treatment Center, an inpatient psych and chemical dependency facility connected with Kalispell Regional Medical Center, and was its first Administrative Director. He

left due to managed care entering the field, impeding any chance of needed treatment for the youth of the area. Rick later took a position working as Executive Director at a psychiatric and chemical dependency hospital in New Mexico where 90% of the population was Native Americans. This position required a great deal of creativity to combine the typical American medical model in substance abuse and psychiatric services with traditional Native American healing practices. This three-year experience challenged his creativity and satisfied his social work background. Following his experience in New Mexico, Rick returned to Montana and became the Head of School for Montana Academy for three years prior to starting Summit.

Finally we also discussed options for improving Summit. Rick shared that enhancing communication with consultants is an improvement goal, since 90 percent of the students referred come from consultants. Rick and Jan recognize the importance of the consultant's role in assisting parents with the stress both prior to and during the placement of their child. He shared that during the development of the program he placed most of his energy on students, programming and interfacing with the local community, and not enough on communicating with consultants.

Summit's willingness to explore improved communication with consultants (as representatives of the parents) will enhance an already fine program, and the best case scenario is for the broader community of consultants to become increasingly incorporated into Summit's regular communications regarding student decision making. In addition as part of their ongoing development, Jan will spearhead a questionnaire that will be sent to all Summit's referring consultants asking how they would like to be involved with the program and their families. I trust Summit Preparatory School will continue to refine their practices of relationship theories, integrate college prep academics and provide life experiences which will assist students in finding excitement and satisfaction in their lives.

Education rears disciples, imitators, and routinists, not pioneers of new ideas and creative geniuses. The schools are not nurseries of progress and improvement, but conservatories of tradition and unvarying modes of thought.

~ Ludwig von Mises

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