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EXTENDED INSIGHTS...

DISCOVERY ACADEMY OPEN HOUSE

Provo, Utah
Brent Hall, Executive Director
Mari Allman, Admissions Director
801-371-2121
www.discoveryacademy.com

Visit by Judith E. Bessette, EdD, July 29, 2008

On a warm sunny day in late July, I had the pleasure of attending an Open House for the new $3 million dollar Academic Center Discovery Academy (DA) has built on its compact campus in downtown Provo, Utah. All of the staff there — from the Academy as well as Discovery Ranch, Oxbow and RedCliff Ascent — were excited and anxious to show off the new space. And...with good reason!

This new building was designed with the program in mind. It's both beautiful and functional. Kudos to Admissions Director Mari Allman who served as the resident interior designer for this project. Various aspects of the layout reflect the *process of discovery*; that is, the experiential process which is at the center of therapy, academics and residential life at Discovery Academy. Developing strong and healthy relationships is a hallmark of the Discovery process.

The classrooms are small — but that's in keeping with the small-sized classes at Discovery Academy. Students have specialized learning plans. The classrooms support individual work and also have a place for one-on-one teaching opportunities between student and teacher. The academic staff have the credentials to serve kids with learning differences as well as kids who can handle AP classes.

The new building now houses the girls' dormitory — a boon for the boys who will continue to be housed in the vintage buildings — because their dorm rooms are getting a new look. The current set-up houses boys in groups of twelve. Because the former girls' space is now available, each dorm grouping will be reduced to eight and each group will have a comfortable sitting area in their dorm space — another way Discovery Academy is backing up its belief in the importance of relationships as part of the Discovery process.

Dorm assignments echo the importance of relationships as well. Believing that students in treatment basically fall into one of two general categories — socially or emotionally disregulated — DA has discovered that assigning students who are alike to live together works better than assigning students who are different to live together. Brent Hall, Executive Director, says "socially maladjusted students *act out*, and emotionally maladjusted kids tend to more *act in*. Assigning dorms this way has helped us to curtail incidents among peers in their

living areas. It creates a more treatment friendly environment because students tend to feel more comfortable in their dorm setting from the very beginning of their program."

The new building houses a fine arts theater — a great space for the drama therapy work going on at DA — as well as a science lab, library, cafeteria, exercise area and comfortable common rooms with ping-pong, pool and video equipment available for use in the students' free time.

As proud as staff is of the new building, Brent Hall was passionate in making sure all of the Open House guests understand the RedCliff Ascent belief that while facilities can enhance a program, it is their people and their commitment to the relational base of the Discovery process that really makes the difference in their students' lives.

All of the staff who spoke — Headmaster Lee Jensen, Clinical Director Matt Hendry and Drama Therapist Nate Mitchell — demonstrated the high caliber of people who work at Discovery Academy, and, through a variety of experiential presentations given by them during the open house, they also demonstrated their expertise in engaging DA students by engaging those of us in the audience.

Discovery Academy works with boys and girls (typically in separate groups) between the ages of 13 and 17. They are able to let a student who turns 18 continue in the program until they graduate because they have separate housing for older students. Most DA students come from a wilderness program or are stepping down from a higher level RTC.

Members of the Student Council were with us for the morning of the open house. These energetic, attractive young men and women spoke about the value of this experiential- based program and how the adventure aspects of DA — outings, the ropes course, equine and drama therapy and the like — made a difference for them. They also spoke about how the level system at DA let them know how they were progressing in the program and what they needed to do to move forward. Most of the students who spoke were at the Honor Level — meaning they were actively involved in community service, part-time jobs, college courses and learning independent living skills. And, they were invaluable assets to the other guests in completing many of the experiential activities that challenged the other open house participants!

I left this Open House with very positive feelings about Discovery Academy. It seems to me that the new building is a tangible expression of the genuine commitment the DA staff, in fact the entire RedCliff Ascent family, has to healing troubled teens through relationships that promote respect and responsibility.

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