Red Hill Academy

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Visit by Larry Stednitz, Oct. 30, 2008

I had the opportunity to attend Red Hill Academy's first open house. Several consultants, providers and friends of Red Hill attended the open house and were briefed on their program. Red Hill Academy is a specialized, co-educational day and boarding school for adolescents ages 14 to 17, located on 35 acres in San Anselmo, California. Red Hill's parent organization is Sunny Hills Services, a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1895. While a new program, Red Hill personnel have been operating day and residential programming for a number of years and have a seasoned staff.

Brad Freed, LMFT, Executive Director, has over 20 years experience working with learning disabled and emotionally troubled students. Brad has held a number of positions with the parent company, including serving as clinical director for a 40 bed residential treatment program. He was also the director of a school based therapeutic day treatment program in the San Francisco area. Jodie Mathison was a former principal of the James R. Sylla School for three years prior to accepting the position of Marketing Director for Red Hill. Jodie has held many positions in special education schools and holds a masters degree in education. What stood out at the open house was the depth, experience and quality of a seasoned staff.

Red Hill Academy works with high school students with average to above average intellect, who have learning differences, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, NLD, ADHD or Asperger's Syndrome. Red Hill works with students who also have mild to moderate emotional and behavioral issues. While many of Red Hill's students have a variety of diagnoses including dysthymia, moderate depression, generalized anxiety disorder, social phobia, obsessive compulsive disorder and mild oppositional defiance, it is thought that their emotional and behavioral issues are directly related to the difficulties of struggling with learning differences. Red Hill does not enroll students who are assaultive, actively psychotic, have a history of running away or seriously involved in alcohol and drug abuse.

The program has been developed over the past two years, and Red Hill has a comprehensive approach in treating and educating its students. Red Hill believes that its students have often not felt safe in previous schools. Philosophically, they stress individualized strengths based approaches, recognizing the power of positive relationships with the students. Red Hill emphasizes the importance of relationships and positive peer influence through extensive work in staff training to assist staff and students in forming meaningful relationships. They have created an environment that supports students in influencing their peers in making the right choices.

Furthermore, Red Hill stresses the unique talent and interests of its students. Opportunities in the community allow students to be involved in normative and wide



ranging activities on campus and the larger community of the area. A primary goal of Red Hill is to help students find their "passions" and learn how to achieve their goals related to the same. Brad reported that the school makes every effort to help each student learn friendship skills and the school attempts to help all students become life-long learners. Their over-arching focus is to provide a wide variety of experiences to help the students identify interests and find the "passion" in their lives. Within 20 miles of the campus, there are several lakes, beaches, and opportunities for enrichment trips into San Francisco and other close by communities.

Red Hill Academy's mission is to work with students who have wide ranging learning differences, along with minor to moderate behavioral/emotional problems that have evolved out of the students' responses to their learning differences. This is reflected in Red Hill's choice of its marketing director. Jodie Mathison was previously the school principal and has a broad background in special education. Jodie told me that much of the curriculum focused upon "project based" learning in order to assist students in strengthening executive functioning skills. Along with a small teacher to student ratio, Red Hill uses the following teaching approaches:

1. Wilson Reading for decoding difficulties
2. Lindamood-Bell Visualization-Verbalization method
3. Kurzweil assistive technology
4. Michelle Garcia Winner's social skill building curriculum
5. The Frostig Center's success attributes for students with learning differences

Students are involved in group therapy three times a week and family therapy twice a month. The group work includes a variety of psycho-social topics including friendship skills, social skills, anger management, group processing and others. Psychiatric coverage is available in the community and Red Hill transports students to these services. It is important to note that Red Hill believes that group therapies along with a strong family component and enriched social exposure experiences combine to provide a powerful therapeutic impact. In those situations where it is felt that individual therapy is needed, parents can contract with a Red Hill therapist.

I visited a classroom where Red Hill's current students were actively involved with the teacher working on a project which required cooperation, team work and planning. The students appeared to be engaged in the activity and enjoying the attention and fellowship. I met with the students after the class and all said they liked being at Red Hill. They felt that the individualized attention was very important to them. They also talked about having trouble being successful in the public schools because they got lost in the crowd. These students were clearly bright, while being socially uncomfortable, but they were very involved in what they were doing.

Red Hill Academy is licensed by the California Department of Social Services. It is also a State certified Non Public School.

The well-informed man, only, is really free. ~ Albert Pike

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