

VISITS...

BOULDER CREEK ACADEMY

Bonnors Ferry, ID
Shawnale Wilson, Admissions Director
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Visit by Loi Eberle on January 22

Recently I visited Boulder Creek Academy (BCA), in Bonners Ferry, ID. Now owned by Universal Health Services, Inc., this Therapeutic Boarding School accepts 13-18 year olds with learning differences and behavioral or emotional problems that have hindered their academic performance. I observed that this school has grown and changed, still retaining its original vision. Though planning began last year, some changes have only become apparent in the last few weeks.

Boulder Creek Academy has moved its academic program to the Emerson building on the former Rocky Mountain Academy (RMA) campus located at the East end of the property. BCA therapeutic staff and activities are largely located on the West end of the property, centered in Quixote Lodge, which also houses the study hall computer lab, a game room and eventually a sewing room. Some elective classes take place on the West end of campus. Students walk between the two ends of campus on a new path near the road. Not only providing safety from traffic, the new path offers an unimpeded view of students while they walk between the boys' and girls' dorms.

Near Quixote lodge is the music barn, where I watched

a small group of students work with their music teacher to hone their performance skills with electric guitars, drums and singing. They also were learning to negotiate performance issues with each other. Downstairs is a workout room with a large number of workout stations. The adjacent building that once housed the BCA dining room remains set up for meal preparation, used now by culinary arts students. Also used for creative activity, student art, pottery wheels and art materials adorn the room where their licensed art therapist facilitates regular Art Studio times. The woodshop, greenhouse, gardens and farm are also on the West end of campus.

At the other end of campus, the Emerson building buzzes with academic classes. I spent time in an American Lit class where I watched a 'battle of the poets.' One student was passionately reading one American poet out loud to another student who was enthusiastically reading out loud a poet expressing the opposite view. It was entertaining and exciting to watch the class participation and fervor.

Nearby in the comp TA class, students were learning how to become computer technicians, with the opportunity to test for certification. I talked with one of the students in the class who described the computer simulations they worked on to learn computer networking. I saw classrooms where Spanish, French and German were taught by teachers who also used the Rosetta Stone instructional materials. To my surprise, I saw where three different lab classes were offered in Chemistry, Biology and Physical Science, each one offering a full lab credit.

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The Center for Safe Youth

In some of the rooms students' academic skills were being assessed. Shawnale explained that upon enrollment students are in the Voyageur phase a minimum of 3 weeks, a change from the earlier requirement of six months. This programming is offered from 8am – 3pm each day for the purpose of creating a healthy transition into a new environment, assessing each student's academic abilities and teaching students to work with the farm animals. The treatment team determines when a student has shown adequate respect, safety and accountability, and is ready for the challenges of the classroom setting so that he or she can move to the next phase. Advancement is based on individual progress rather than that of the peer group, as had once been the policy.

Shawnale Wilson, Boulder Creek Academy Admissions Director, and I walked across campus and met a student and instructor, both carrying shovels. After introductions, the student answered questions in a pleasant and respectful manner, even when Shawnale asked them to do a rather challenging task: shovel a path in the frozen snow that blocked the entrance to one of the buildings. The student seemed quite willing, with no evidence of "attitude."

Later, Shawnale explained BCA now attempts one-on-one campus interventions when a student's behavior becomes so disruptive they cannot be allowed to participate in normal student activity. Instead of sending them to a wilderness program, they assign the student to complete a project, working at all times along side a staff member. Although the additional staff time may be billed to the

family, in many cases it can prevent needing to send the child to a therapeutic wilderness program. It also provides a more personalized approach to teaching skills that are needed to maintain safe and responsible behavior on campus.

Later we saw the student and instructor again, this time sitting in front of a lovely fire they had built in the fireplace of the [former RMA] dining hall. The student's performance, attitude and cooperation had won him permission to return to regular student activity the next day. The sun had set and wonderful smells of dinner wafted through the lounge and dining room combined with flickering firelight; the room felt warm and cozy.

In compliance with Idaho law, all 18 year old Boulder Creek Academy students live in separate housing in the dorm. Appropriate 18 year old students are allowed to live in on-campus student apartments. The apartment I visited, a short walk from the dining hall, could house up to 6 young women. One student showed me each of the three bedrooms where 3 young women currently lived somewhat independently, cooking their own meals and doing their own laundry. She explained how happy she was to be there.

Earlier I had seen her working on her laptop and asked why she wasn't taking part in class. I learned that she was a HS graduate and was taking online classes through North Idaho College (NIC). By having the wireless internet accessible only in supervised classrooms, BCA is able to monitor internet activity.

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BOULDER:

Overall, I was impressed with the feeling of participation and enthusiasm I saw among BCA students. My student/client talked excitedly about his various expeditions, especially his first time dog sledding. In addition to hearing about snowboarding, I saw photos of BCA students kayaking in Alaska, hiking in Glacier Park, and receiving equine training in the nearby indoor/outdoor arena. The students appear to be having fun and engaging in academics.

Having visited BCA many times, I was surprised at how the recent changes have created even a more enthusiastic feeling on campus among staff and students. I also realize the challenges sometimes encountered by students at this school are consistent with learning and developmental issues and social skills that are not well developed. BCA staff appears well suited to help students academically and emotionally to overcome their dysfunctional coping mechanisms and develop more effective ones. Director Paul Johnson expresses a willingness to continue developing and expanding their approach, rather than simply relying on the progress they have made in the past.

SYCAMORE CANYON ACADEMY

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Visit by Larry Stednitz, January 27, 2009

Sycamore Canyon Academy, a program of Rite of Passage, was founded in 2008 and is located on twenty acres approximately thirty minutes outside of Tucson, Arizona. Rite of Passage is a not-for-profit organization that has worked with youth throughout the country, typically from the juvenile court system. Although Sycamore Canyon opened its doors just two years ago, they transitioned several staff members who have lengthy experience with Rite of Passage. Unlike its parent company, Sycamore Canyon also works with private pay youth and has eight youth funded privately and twenty youth funded by Pima County Probation Department. The program accepts "softer" youth from the Department and carefully screens those that they accept. Sycamore Canyon administration is committed to offering services to the youth of Arizona. The typical length of stay is between four and nine months.

The director is Ike Shipman, MSW. Ike has over 12 years working with troubled families and youth. His wide ranging experience includes being a teacher, coach, therapist, case manager and program director. It was apparent that Ike is thoughtful and well experienced. Throughout my visit and inquiry into the program model, the program is well thought out with several "best practices" components.

The students, aged twelve to seventeen, typically have shown oppositional behavior, histories of alcohol and drug abuse, and involvement with negative peers in their communities. Many may carry a wide range of diagnoses including conduct disorder.