

TRAILS CAROLINA WILDERNESS THERAPY

Lake Toxaway, NC

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Visit by Lon Woodbury, November 10, 2009

Nestled in a secluded valley in North Carolina on 33 rural acres, this wilderness therapy program at first glance presents a very pastoral picture. Even the old buildings look rustic rather than run down (It used to be a summer camp). I understand the stream running through their property contains trout, and I was surprised that it ran clear and you could see the bottom, contrary to most rivers and streams I've seen in the South. Their horses were friendly, gentle and well fed, and like just about every North Carolina rural property I have ever seen, it has a pond, which is just below the main Lodge.

We had a chance to talk with some of the students, and they looked alert, were friendly and obviously getting a lot out of their experience there. One of the boys did a demonstration in handling a horse, explaining every step of how he could control the horse without touching it but simply with body and hand signals. He was the one who, when he arrived, was afraid of horses and the most he could see ever accomplishing would be to someday pet a horse. When asked, all the boys agreed that their horse had become one of their best friends.

The girls were equally impressive. They were open and outgoing. One girl had been there 104 days (close to a record)

and had what is sometimes called a "wilderness glow." She had considerable and serious personal problems before arriving, and it seemed to me that she felt so much better about herself from her experience that she couldn't help but sport a bright smile that seemed quite genuine.

The program is a minimum of 28 days, but most students take longer before they are ready to move on to either a boarding school or home. The property I described above operates as a base, but the students spend most of their time in the field, hiking and camping in the surrounding national forest lands. Part of the curriculum is basic wilderness skills such as starting a fire with a bow drill (which teaches persistence) and other wilderness skills that teach self reliance and team-work. But this is just the surface.

The whole program draws on multiple elements, each of which can be drawn on to match the individual needs of the students. In addition to the wilderness therapy experience, which itself is a powerful change element, the students have regular sessions with the therapists, equine therapy and a generic positive peer culture, as opposed to the text book Positive Peer Culture (PPC). In addition the program adds a sophisticated approach to experiential academics which supplements their wilderness and outdoor experience in a way to relate academic topics such as biology, history, etc., to what the students are doing in their day to day program. I had a chance to visit with the Academic Dean and his creative ability to "think outside the box" is impressive. The program is registered as a non-public school by the state of North Carolina, and students can earn up five credits during their time there. In addition to being a non-public

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school, the program is licensed by the state of North Carolina.

All groups are single sex, and the optimum size is fairly small, consisting of 6 to 8 students. This enhances their ability to develop an individualized program to meet the varying needs of each student. They have a girls group, a boys group and a young boys group. Since it is individualized, the groups can be equally effective when the groups are smaller than the optimum when enrollments dictate smaller groups.

A lot of emphasis is made to carrying out a parallel program for parents. This includes weekly parent conference calls which include all the parents associated with a specific student group, and at least two on-campus parent seminars during a child's stay. The staff reported that a frequent remark by graduating students is how much their parents had changed while the student had been in the program. This success was explained by two things: One, the parents develop a peer group of their own for support at the same time the students are developing their peer group, and two the focus of the parent on-campus seminars and weekly phone conferences are to look at the parents' patterns and how to make them more supportive of what their children need. From comments by graduating students and their parents, it seems to be working.

The program is about ready to celebrate their first anniversary and has obviously come a long way in a short year. By the way, the name "TRAILS" stands for Trust, Respect, Accountability, Integrity, Leadership and Service. The name itself is a good description of what this wilderness therapy program is trying to teach their students.

NEW PERSPECTIVES...

[New Perspectives schools and programs are those new to Woodbury Reports, Inc., and are presented to expand your knowledge, with the disclaimer that we know little more about them at this time than what appears here. Inclusion in Places for Struggling Teens™, of course, does not imply any endorsement by Woodbury Reports, Inc. -Lon]

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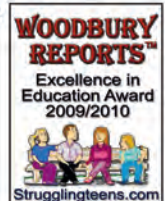
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