

VISIT REPORT...

JOHN DEWEY ACADEMY

Great Barrington, MA
Lisa Sinsheimer, MD – Admissions Director
917-597-7814
lisa@sinsheimer.net
www.jda.org

Visit by: Kristie Campbell, BS Psy, August 13, 2011

Last August I was honored with the chance to participate in one of the most unique graduations I've ever attended as six students ended their journey with the John Dewey Academy (JDA) and moved into the thrills of "the real world." Although a therapeutic boarding school for troubled youth located in mid-western Massachusetts, JDA is one of the most "real" programs that exist today. Their peer-based approach allows students to learn what is expected of them while on campus and teaches them how to behave off campus as well.

The John Dewey Academy is a year-round, college preparatory boarding school for students age 15-21. Housed in Searle's Castle in Great Barrington, JDA is for adolescents of high potential who have made poor life choices. They are often referred to as jerks who continue to make bad decisions... not caring about others around them, especially their families. They lack motivation in school, their grades have slipped and they have often turned to drugs or alcohol, engaged in risk-taking behaviors, etc. School refusal is a common presenting problem. They typically have very poor relationships with

their parents, siblings and grandparents or other extended family and use negative influences to fill the void of relationships. They are almost always anxious and depressed, and psychotropic medications have failed to address these issues to any meaningful degree.

The length of stay at John Dewey Academy depends on a variety of factors, including age at time of arrival, with a range of 18 to 30 months. Two years is the average. Students must commit to being at the academy and those who cannot or will not often find themselves in a wilderness program to help them through their resistance.

I understand the graduation ritual lasts approximately three days, during which family members come for parent/ family workshops. There is also an emotional/spiritual bonfire, time for graduates to leave campus with their families and primary group therapy sessions with all the non-graduating students and their families. I was on campus for the primary group sessions, went to dinner with a few non-graduating families off campus, spent the night in the castle with the students and then attended the graduate breakfast and graduation itself. This was a most impressive event.

As I arrived on campus, the graduates and their families were heading off campus for some personal family time. The rest of the families were headed into what the staff at John Dewey call Primary Group. I was glad to see Tom Bratter, Headmaster Emeritus, standing in the foyer of the castle as families separated into their groups. I later learned that Primary Groups are group with the student's primary therapist. Headmaster Ken Steiner and Dean of Students Andrea Esperat run the Primary Groups. Headmaster Emeritus Tom Bratter and Parent Liaison Lisa Sinsheimer co-facilitate groups for parents such as the Divorced Parents Group and the Senior Parents Group.



Photo by Skyler Jepson

THE GATE OF HISTORY SWINGS ON SMALL HINGES, AND SO DO PEOPLE'S LIVES.

With the click of a mouse your son may be stepping into a trap carefully laid to prey upon his own developing body. More than 11 million teens view pornography on line (Washington Post 2004). *Early intervention can help your boy break free.*

Oxbow offers treatment *specifically designed for teenaged boys who struggle with sexual dependency*. Here students can acknowledge their behaviors more quickly, then learn to overcome them.



If you fear your son may struggle with sexual dependency, don't make him fight alone.

Answers and information are available at www.oxbowacademy.net or call Barbara at 435-590-7198

When I mentioned that JDA is one of the most real programs, I of course was referring to their no bull therapeutic style. Primary Group is one direct example. Ken led the group that I attended and his style was both full of compassion and reality. Students talk about issues, and their peers call them out on behaviors and ideas that aren't genuine. I witnessed a compassionate way of doing this the day I attended. One of the "rules" of confrontation (whether spoken or unspoken) was that if a student or staff called attention to a student's misbehavior, that person had to relate the behavior to their own life. An example, say I notice Sally is being manipulative and attempting to play her parents against the staff and I confront her in group. In order for me to validly confront her in group, I have to be willing to air my own experiences of manipulating my parents and explain what was happening with me when I was trying to create havoc. This strategy helps the rebellious student relate to other students and realize they're not alone in their issues and at the same time, helps the student create a peer group setting. It also helps the relating student remember what they've come through.

During Primary Group, one of the boys was "kicked out." He'd been at JDA only a short time and was not committed to working the program. His parents sat strong in the group and told him he'd run out of options, that he was going to a wilderness program because there was no way he could return home with his dysfunction. The boy pleaded that his parents let him come home because of this excuse or that. "It was too hard; he would change; he missed his room; he missed his little brothers." He was reminded by other students that he hadn't "been there" for his little brothers for quite some time and that until he fixed himself and his own dysfunction, he was truly unable to be a good big brother. He cried

as reality hit him that he would not be returning home to waste his life. Toward the end of the weekend, this boy had had time to think about his situation and was keeping an open mind to going to wilderness with the possibility of earning his way back to John Dewey Academy. (I have since learned that this student returned in October to JDA and is now fully committed to graduating.)

We left Primary Group and readied for a parent dinner. Each undergraduate student (except the boy who was leaving) was responsible for setting up dinner reservations off campus for them and their parents. I went with several families as well as the parents of the boy leaving for wilderness. During dinner, I witnessed students explaining their backgrounds to this couple. One boy in particular had a similar story and related his experience to reassure them they had made the right decision. He answered any questions they had. One thing that stuck out to me is that these students had chosen a life of complete sobriety. They firmly and politely explained to the waiter that no drink menus would be necessary, and gently reminded one of the parents who considered ordering an alcoholic beverage that our table was a "drug free" table by choice. During dinner, I watched their body language, their facial expressions; I listened to their tone of voice. I was impressed by their level commitment and self-control. I was further impressed by their self-confidence and sense of pride.

After dinner, I returned to the castle and turned in for the night. Most of the staff had left the campus at 5pm and students were left in the castle without direct adult supervision, although an adult is on campus 24/7 in case of emergency. This is what is meant by a true peer-based approach. Students consult adult house parents

CONTINUED: JOHN DEWEY ACADEMY/6

Helping young women internalize invaluable
Dialectic Behavioral Therapy and Mindfulness
Skills so they can...

Developed
by the
Optimum
Performance
Institute with
nearly a decade
of experience helping
young adults achieve
INDEPENDENCE, happiness
and balance in their lives.

OPI is JCAHO-accredited.

Roanne's Phased System for
Independence* begins with
Immersion Phase in DBT and
Mindfulness Techniques in a staffed
home in Malibu, CA. Participants
transition to independence in staffed
apartments with guidance from
OPI Departments of Education,
Career, Volunteer and Extra
Curricular Activities.

*Generally, insurance does not cover
this comprehensive program

Harness the energy, courage and (yes)
vulnerability needed to experience the
excitement, passion and joy that
comes with...

Cultivating personal abilities
and persevering through
the storms associated
with being
independent and
completing long
term goals
and dreams
in the real
world.



Roanne
Manor



FINALLY!

**A UNIQUE PROGRAM FOR WOMEN
AGES 18-28 with disorders of emotion
regulation such as Borderline
Personality Disorder/Traits
helping them achieve greater
independence, hope and balance
in their lives.**

Find out more about this
unique program now on

www.opiliving.com

www.parentshope.org

Click on Borderline Personality
Disorder program or call

(888) 558-0617



Celebrating 20 Years of Turning Hearts Homeward



In its 20th year,
the nonprofit ANASAZI Foundation
helps to restore and strengthen parent-child relationships.

ANASAZI's confrontation-free outdoor behavioral healthcare services are ideal for adolescents and young adults struggling with entitlement issues, defiance, mild-to-moderate mood disorders, and self-defeating behaviors. ANASAZI's renowned parenting program and aftercare services allow committed parents to create a home environment that enhances family unity and promotes a lasting change in family behavior.

Scholarships are available for those in need.

800.678.3445 | anasazi.org



Benchmark Transitions

Life Strategies for Emerging Adults

Young Adult Transitional Living

Benchmark is a residential, co-ed therapeutic transitional living program. Our model is peer group and community based, using a life coaching and therapeutic approach.

We offer practical application with skills-based and cognitive behavioral treatment, allowing students to learn personal responsibility and accountability through hands-on trials.

The core component of our curriculum requires a minimum commitment of six months to complete Level I and Level II. The second component of the program is optional and includes on and off property independent living, which makes the typical length of stay a total of 10-12 months. We also offer extended care programs from 12-24 months.

Dual Diagnosis Treatment

We have a Dual Treatment option...

Recovery by Benchmark students are those who have a history of substance use or abuse.

Behavioral Health is for those students who have not exhibited any issues with drugs and/or alcohol.

Both programs include our comprehensive curriculum of education, vocational & work skills, life skills and clinical treatment.



LIFE STRATEGIES FOR EMERGING ADULTS

1.800.474.4848

1971 ESSEX COURT
REDLANDS, CA 92373

WWW.BENCHMARKTRANSITIONS.COM

when necessary, but they are clearly holding each other accountable. Because of the admissions process at JDA, and the fact that the students have to prove they want to be there, this approach works well with this population. I was able to observe the students, many of whom were unaware of my observation. This gave me a true sense for what happens in the castle when the staff is away. I was again impressed by the sense of community and self-control displayed.

The next morning I attended the graduate breakfast. All the students attended, dressed for a formal ceremony. All the faculty and staff were in attendance, as were the parents of the graduates. However, none of the parents of non-graduating students were invited. At the buffet style breakfast I was able to visit with the graduates and observed them giving back to their community in a special ceremony.

After breakfast pictures were taken and we left for the nearby theater where the graduation ceremony would take place. I was instantly transported back to my own graduation 17 years ago. Back when graduations from therapeutic boarding schools were small and personalized. This graduation produced a similar feeling. Each graduate was asked to speak and faculty and staff spoke about each graduate's journey. Parents came forward and shared their journeys. Undergraduates stood and shared their feelings and well-wishes for the graduates. There were many goodbyes, much laughter, and many tears.

Finally, there was an award ceremony where all deserving students were awarded with achievement awards they had truly earned. The class of 2011 was then presented to the audience. And at the end, six young adults stood before the audience, ready to spread their wings and fly off to prestigious schools (Vassar College, Wheaton College, Clark University, Johns Hopkins University, Columbia University and Carleton College), full of hope for a bright future and courage to conquer life.

"The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, the education, the money, than circumstances, than failure, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have... our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. ."

~ Charles R Swindoll