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SCHOOL CONNECTIONS WORKSHOPS

By Lon Woodbury

I just finished another successful School Connections Workshop which this time was at Ventana Canyon Resort in Tucson Arizona last Monday, March 18th. School Connections is a way for many schools and programs to make meaningful interaction with Independent Educational Consultants in one day.

Sometimes referred to jokingly as similar to "speed-dating," it is a round-robin event where every Consultant and School or Program representative attending has 25 minutes to talk and answer questions of each other. The numbers of consultants are matched to the number of schools and programs, so at any time during the day, each have someone to meet with to ask and answer questions. This year a couple of consultants had to cancel at the last minute giving a few extra breaks to the representatives of schools and programs, but although the cancels were disappointing, it resulted in minimum disruption to the rest.

This day was very beneficial for me, and many other participants were saying the same thing at the end of the day. I had met representatives from some schools and programs new to me that are well worth knowing about, and managed to get updates from several programs I've know well for several years. Developing a personal network like this is vital for those working in and with private schools and programs for struggling teens.

In the private parent-choice network of residential schools and programs for struggling teens, referrals are largely based on personal contact. This is contrary to the systems practiced by mass education and mass mental health systems where credentials, demographics and centralized decision making are the order of the day. In this private parent choice system, the personal touch and individualization is the foundation through and through. Each school and program has its own unique strengths and personality. For the most part, each student gets individualized attention and an individualized program based on his/her unique needs. In many schools and programs, each graduating student is given the spotlight for at least a few minutes so everybody present can celebrate their personal achievement with them. Schools and programs frequently form a working team with the parents to collaborate on helping the parents' child.

This private network has expanded every year since I started in it in 1984, and parents now have an ever widening and confusing universe of choices when they find themselves deciding they need some kind of residential intervention for their child. The job of an Independent Educational Consultant is to be aware of this wide universe of choices so they can give knowledgeable referral advice to parents based on the Consultant's personal knowledge of the people and curriculum in each of these schools and programs.

School Connections has developed a system to help Consultants gain this important personal knowledge in a quick, efficient and effective manner. This workshop was one of several they conduct throughout the year. The only thing that might provide better results of this kind of interchange of knowledge would be for a Consultant to visit the school or program physically.



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ACADEMY AT SWIFT RIVER

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Visit by: Judith E. Bessette, EdD, December 6, 2012

Tucked in the foothills of the Berkshires in Massachusetts, sitting on over six hundred acres of mixed forest, meadow, beaver ponds and mountain springs, you'll find the rambling white clapboard buildings of the Academy at Swift River (ASR). A college-prep, co-ed therapeutic boarding school, ASR serves high school students 14 – 18 years old with average to above average aptitude.

ASR students all have some combination of behavioral, emotional and learning issues, including moderate mood disorders, academic underachievement, school avoidance, attention disorders, low self-esteem, adoption issues, unresolved grief and substance abuse. Through clinically intense individual, group and family therapy; an academic program that offers both college prep classes as well as support for moderate learning differences; and a strong residential program that incorporates both community service and a vigorous outdoor recreation program, students are able to rediscover themselves and the infinite possibilities of their lives.

ASR was opened by Aspen Education Group in 1997. I've visited several times...and over the years, there have been many changes. From its original emotional growth model and its own wilderness program to the more clinically sophisticated therapeutic boarding school it is today, its core values remain intact. ASR remains a safe and nurturing environment – a place where adolescents can get back on track and discover their true potential.

Bar Clarke joined ASR about six months ago as Executive Director. He is uniquely positioned to lead the school. Bar has spent nearly 25 years working with adolescents and young adults. He has worked in and led private high schools – one in the US and one in Botswana. In 2004, Bar joined an educational consulting firm, serving as the Director of Special Needs Services, placing students in therapeutic school like ASR, residential treatment centers, drug and alcohol rehab facilities and young adult programs. In 2009, he opened his own consulting firm.

ASR's current outreach materials are organized around several key words...all starting with "R"... including rebuild, reinvent and rekindle...words that capture what can happen for a student there. It seems to me that these words also describe the new (or renewed) ASR...something Bar Clarke has been integral in creating.

I felt a wonderful sense of caring and community during my visit...a feeling that was validated by the students with whom I met...reflecting the school's commitment to hard work, academics, education and clinical integrity. One of the boys who toured me around had been at the school for nearly a year – so had about equal amounts of time with the current administration



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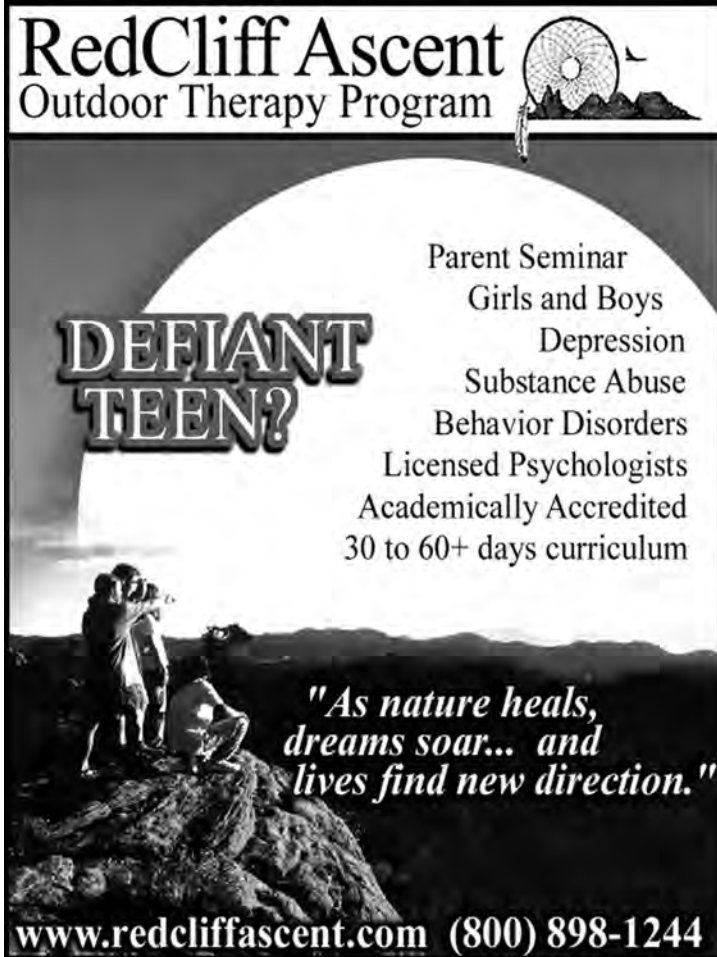
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