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THREE SPRINGS OF PAINT ROCK VALLEY

Trenton, Alabama

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Lon's Visit on June 9, 2003

One's first impression when approaching **Paint Rock Valley School**, nestled in the hills a few miles outside **Huntsville**, is one of peaceful coexistence with nature. This valley was first settled shortly before the Civil War, as the gravestones in the

little cemetery next to the school campus attest. Those settlers considered themselves part of the Paint Rock Valley community, and the **Three Springs** of Paint Rock Valley School continues that tradition by acting and thinking as a community.

The school enrolls both boys and girls, but the considerable distance between the boys program, situated on one side of campus, and the girls program on the other side, creates essentially two single sex programs that are tailored for the unique needs of each gender.

The program has roots in several ideas that have been shown to be of benefit to children struggling with poor decision-making: long-term camping, **Indian** ceremony, and professional therapy.

When a child enrolls, he or she is assigned to a group of up to twelve students. The groups are self-contained, with little or no interaction between the groups. Each group has their own cabin, a semi-permanent structure that is back away from the center of the main campus. The cabins are used for sleeping, except when the temperatures are below freezing, and are used for cooking some of the meals on a wood stove or open campfire, and are the location for some of the ceremonies. Every few years a group will tear down the





structure, move to a different location and built a new structure. This causes the students to be in steady contact with nature and provides construction experience for those lucky enough to be there at the time. Both the contact with nature and the acquisition of

construction skills are very healing and growth inducing. Students also have the opportunity to experience nature during their frequent expeditions throughout the valley and to the tops of the surrounding ridges. Several of the students proudly pointed out to me the hilltop that their group had climbed.

Humans seem to need ceremonies, which this school seems to recognize, having adopted a number of Indian ceremonies and icons. The early logo of the school was a type of medicine wheel, with the four directions of the compass on it that symbolized the four



levels through which the students progress. Although no longer used as the school's logo, it is still prominent on the campus and the students are very familiar the multitude of meanings associated with each part of this medicine wheel. When a student passes to a higher stage along the journey through this level system, it is marked by a ceremony in which a student receives a symbolic stone. Each of the stones the students earn in this way are kept in their personal medicine bag. Scattered around the campus are several circles of stones that are used when a student has earned a ceremony of passage.

Paint Rock Valley School is licensed both as a private school, as well as a Residential Treatment Center. Each student has regular individual counseling sessions with their assigned therapist and participates in regular groups called "nightlies," in which they work on personal issues, successes, and problems that have occurred during the day.

Students stay for an average of fourteen or fifteen months, though graduation can occur within eight months if a student makes good progress. A visit with parents is scheduled in the first month, with visits continuing throughout the program, depending on the student's progress.



Academics are taken seriously. They use the curriculum and textbooks that are adopted by the state, which they individualize by starting at the level of achievement demonstrated by each student when he or she arrives at the school. The teachers are trained in

special education and the school is ready to deal with a wide variety of learning differences. Three hours in the morning are devoted to core subjects with the afternoon blocks functioning

as electives that include equine therapy, the climbing wall, a ropes course, drumming, self-management, and vocational skills.

The parents have a stage system that parallels the students' four level system. This serves the dual function of helping the parents to better understand and support what their child is experiencing, as well as helping parents to change problematic aspects of their family dynamics. Having the parents participate in a level system with ceremonies that parallel their child's, acknowledges that in some way their child's problems are a family problem that is best addressed by everyone's participation.

Once a child graduates, the program administers monthly aftercare meetings that are open to all graduates. The school feels the work that was done on campus is only part of the job, and that it is very important to continue to actively support their graduates in order to help create permanent change in both the students and their families.

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