

Helping youth to reach new heights: The Respite Wilderness Program

Challenging hikes are not for the faint of heart, particularly for youth dealing with serious emotional and behavioral health challenges. But, a program out of the North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center is helping youth to see their strengths one step at a time.

Now in its 12th year, the Center's Respite Wilderness Program is engaging adolescents with serious emotional disturbances in healthy

and demanding outdoor group experiences. The program has been helping to fill a vital gap in the lives of these children and their families. Often families are hard pressed to find activities and structure for their teens who just don't fit into usual teams or clubs and who are at risk for isolation. Without wilderness activities, they would likely spend time alone in their bedrooms in front of computers or television screens.



The Center offers 36 Saturday wilderness challenges each year to youth between 12 to 18 years of age. The program uses the trails, beaches and mountains of County and State parks in NYS, where classrooms and office walls are replaced by trees, trails, sand, mountains, lakes and streams. Social workers and leaders actively participate in the day's challenge with the youth, and all are subject to the same physical and climate challenges as the rest of the group. The wilder-

ness group experience is a powerful "right" of passage for youth, leaders and the entire group. Each experience is unique.

On one hike, Joey had a particularly difficult time climbing a steep, rocky incline at Harriman State Park. Frightened, hyperventilating and whimpering, he repeatedly cried, "I can't do this!" But he wasn't alone. With the help and patient support of the group leader

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across disciplines to achieve the vision articulated in two State plans—the Early Childhood Plan and The Children’s Plan—that have each received strong endorsement from NYS’s child- and family-serving agencies.

To learn more about Project LAUNCH, go to <http://projectlaunch.promoteprevent.org/> and to learn more about the Westchester County children’s system of care, read the annual report at <http://www.westchestergov.com/MentalHealth/pdfs/AnnualReport2009.pdf>.

Enhancing the Youth Voice

During The Children’s Plan development, youth offered essential recommendations for shaping a person-centered, family-driven and youth-guided system of care. During discussions then, youth pointed to the value of empowerment, advocacy and peer support to their recovery. They called for more peer support programs and services, indicating that when youth serve as trainers, advocates, and policy makers, they improve the system, and gain necessary developmental and professional skills needed for success.

In recognition of the important role of youth in helping to strengthen recovery-oriented services and supports, this year, through Families Together in NYS, young people are being hired and have begun to be introduced into OMH regions as “Regional Youth Partners.” The Regional Youth Partners are responsible for supporting local youth groups, hosting regional forums for youth to connect with each other and network, and providing technical assistance and training. Regional Youth Partners are expected to bring their own unique experiences with receiving mental health services and to use them in developing as peer support specialists for children engaged in services.

Supporting Primary Care Physicians in Treating Children and Their Families

Through funding provided under The Children’s Plan and in collaboration with DOH, Conference of Local Mental Hygiene Directors, American Academy of Pediatrics and the NYS Academy of Family Physicians, psychiatric consultation is being made available to primary care physicians (pe-

and other youth in the group, Joey inched his way up, step-by-step, crawling when he was too scared to stand, until he reached the summit. His experience stayed with him, when two weeks later, during discussion of a future hike, Joey requested that the group hike the same difficult, terrifying trail. Having thought often of the hike, he discovered a new-found sense of pride in his accomplishment. He was visibly proud for pushing himself far beyond what he considered his physical and emotional limits. He expected that he would be able to hike up that same trail again, but this time without fear—and he did!

The Respite Wilderness Program is designed to provide Saturday respite for families whose children have serious emotional and behavioral conditions by offering youth engaging wilderness activities that bolster confidence and competence. It promotes social skills, helps youth to understand what mutual support truly means, provides opportunities for identifying difficult behaviors and adopting more healthy coping mechanisms, builds a sense of belonging and camaraderie, and enables youth to make contributions to their community through environmental conservation.

Adolescents are referred to the program by local mental health centers, intensive case managers, probation officers, day treatment programs, foster care and group homes, private clinicians, school personnel, parent advocates and others working with youths who are troubled, in trouble or causing trouble. Youth who participate have an array of emotional and behavioral disturbance diagnoses; some have emotional disturbance and developmental disabilities. With some teens participating up to two to three years, the program’s leadership

has been consistent under its founder and coordinator, Bruce Kaufstein. And, for the past five years he has had the same co-leader and a number of volunteers including other agency staff members.

The leadership ensures that hikes and activities maximize the potential for successful completion by all members, even the weakest, and are safe and appropriate for members’ physical abilities. The program also promotes “greening” ecology and conservation projects on Long Island. This includes assisting park officials at Caumsett State Park to contain the aggressive, invasive “Mile a Minute Weed.” It also involves collecting plastic bottles and debris on Beach Clean-Ups at Robert Moses State Park. Actively participating in environmental projects reinforces the capability of each youth to contribute to the “greening” of society.

The good news about the program is that youth eventually realize how far they have come from being isolated in their bedrooms playing computer games to mastering difficult challenges and making a difference. Just stop by the Center some time and see the smiles and gleaming faces of group members when they watch the DVDs of their conservation efforts and painstaking steep mountain climbs. The smiles attest to their accomplishments, achievements and pride, but they don’t stop there. They continue as the youth share these filmed chronicles with friends and family.

To learn more about the Respite Wilderness Program, contact Bruce Kaufstein, LCSW, Director of Clinical Services and Respite Wilderness Coordinator, at bkaufstein@northshorechildguidance.org.