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WILDERNESS JOURNEY SOME TROUBLED TEENS SUCCEED, OTHERS FAIL, IN A 20-DAY STRUGGLE FOR SELF- DISCOVERY TO THE TOP OF HIS OWN MOUNTAIN

Halfway through its 20-day journey through the wilderness, Crew 4 is falling apart.

Wilderness School instructors Aaron Wiebe and Scott Ring have struggled to hold the crew of eight troubled teenage boys together as they lug heavy backpacks over the Appalachian Trail. But along the Housatonic River in Sheffield, Mass., the clouds of mosquitoes and 90-degree temperatures light the group's already-short fuse.

Ring is clubbed with a paddle. Students try to hijack canoes.

Joel, the bully at the top of the pecking order, goes after Mark, the scapegoat at the bottom, with a broken bottle. Wiebe puts his body between two students, the only way he can protect Mark.

When the smoke clears, both Joel and Mark have left this state-run program. Kris, who would be released from the Long Lane School for juvenile offenders if he completes the wilderness regimen, helps Ring and Wiebe round up the remaining kids.

Then he picks up his pack and heads to Route 7. The bugs, the fighting, the arduous hiking are too much. He's given up.

“He was an awesome kid,” Ring says. “But I knew there was no stopping him. He's back at ‘The Lane’ now.”

Downriver, the remaining five kids name themselves the

“Fantastic Five” and take gleeful turns riding on Wiebe's shoulders as he spins like a top. He stumbles dizzily as they tug at his shorts.

“Spin me again, Aaron.”

Each summer dozens of boys and girls teetering on the edge of trouble take a spin at self-discovery in the forests along the Appalachian Trail. Amid the disappointments -- more than a few -- many young lives are enriched and changed for the better.

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The *Wilderness School's* journey started in the Long Lane gymnasium 25 years ago, when state officials hoped an Outward Bound-style adventure in the wilderness could turn around the lives of troubled teens.

The program, now part of the Department of Children and Families, is based in a cluster of log cabins in the East Hartland woods. Its classrooms are deep in the mountains of northwest Connecticut, where students hike, canoe, climb and camp for most of their 20 days at the school.

“The 20-day journey, to me, has extreme value for a small cost,” says Tom Dyer, director of the school. “For some kids, it's a leap of faith, for others it's a stepping stone.”

Some students come from Long Lane or state juvenile detention centers. Others are referred from foster homes, youth service bureaus or therapists. Referral agencies pay \$1,000 for each child they send. The state pays the rest of the \$4,500 cost.

In all, 85 kids attended the school's five sessions this summer. They are divided into crews: up to 10 students with two instructors.

Crews 3, 4 and 5 make up this, the summer's second session.

DCF statistics show that program graduates are less likely to be in court and less likely to get involved with drugs; they improve their

social skills and, certainly, their self-reliance.

Yet Dyer and his staff see something in the process and spirituality of "the journey" that can't be shown in the statistics. He shows a letter his staff received from a 15-year-old former student.

Its themes are familiar: expulsion from school, institutionalization, attempted suicide and redemption in the wilderness.

"The reason I pulled my life together is because I discovered something that your school had instilled in me: Confidence ... I owe you my life," she writes.

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The journey begins like a camp check-in, except for a few details.

Social workers accompany many of the kids, instead of moms and dads. They line up at a table to check in their medications: Zoloft for depression, Ritalin for behavioral problems, antihistamines, Advil, asthma inhalers.

Kevin, one kid waiting to check in his medications, is somber and withdrawn.

"I felt bad bringing him here," says his father, Rich, adding that Kevin's therapist recommended the program. "He wasn't looking forward to it."

Staff members detail medication schedules for campers, ask about side effects, count pills and put the bottles into plastic bags that the instructors will carry.

Takisha arrives at base camp with her social worker, Lisa Zalaski. She's been living at Long Lane because, "I have an assault problem and a bad temper."

Zalaski says Takisha was fine "until she found out there would be no mirrors in the woods."

“And I'm not eating any trail mix,” Takisha adds. Like all the kids in the program, she signs a contract promising certain behavior and setting goals for herself.

“I hope to lose weight in my stomach and learn how to interact with peers,” she says, “and how to follow directions even if I don't like it.”

After check-in, students and staff form a large circle, where program director Jane Lohmann welcomes them: “This is the very beginning of something very hard that each and every one of you has the courage to start and the courage to finish.”

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By day four, the slow pace of Crew 3 -- a mile every two hours -- is frustrating Phil, a big, boisterous, Butthead-imitating 15-year-old from Manchester.

“C'mon, you guys,” he complains from his position behind Tim Lucksinger, the instructor hiking “point” at the front of the crew. “Why are you so slow?”

Three other students had run away that morning and the group's start was delayed while Lucksinger tried to catch them. When he returned without them, the crew had to divide up the food and gear the runaways were carrying. The late start and extra weight is frustrating, but the kids say they are better off.

“Actually, I feel better,” says Kevin, the once-reluctant camper. “They were the three biggest instigators and whiners and started a lot of fights.”

Lucksinger points out that the crew's performance has improved over the first day. They are moving a little faster, and Matt, who carried only his sleeping bag the day before, is carrying almost all his gear.

But Kevin and Matt still sit down or fall every 15 minutes or so, forcing the entire group to stop, and drawing jeers from the rest of

the crew.

Phil eats blueberries off bushes along the trail while he waits for the rest of the crew to catch up. "If there was a place like this by my house," he says, "I'd be there all the time."

Josh, whose 15 years have taken him from El Salvador to Bridgeport to Long Lane lockup, hikes at the opposite end of the line from Phil, his tarpmate. He likes the woods, too, but for different reasons.

"If I do this, I get to go home," says Josh, who brags to the rest of the crew about the shackles he has worn at Long Lane and the drug dealership he'll return to in Bridgeport when he's released. "I have to get in fights at Long Lane, but here I can relax. I feel at home."

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On day five, Crew 3 is preparing to push ahead after a relaxing hour atop Bear Mountain, but a hiker crossing the summit brings a message from program director Lohmann: Stay put.

She had picked up the three runaways at a Massachusetts police station early that morning, brought them back to their campsite, and rallied them to hike 7 miles to catch up with their crew. One at a time, they climb to the summit, and the crew circles to negotiate their return.

As the group prepares to leave, Lohmann and instructor Seal Rossignol have to pull aside Matt, a 13-year-old who meditates at overlooks and molds fanciful animals out of the clay he carries with him.

His cousin was shot to death Saturday night, they explain. His mother would like him to come home for the funeral. They would like him to rejoin his crew when it's over.

Two days later Matt goes home to help bury his cousin. He doesn't return.

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For instructors, the journey is more difficult every year.

“The population has changed,” Tom Dyer says. “It’s younger and more troubled.”

The first year’s program served 15- to 19-year-olds. Now, it takes kids between 13 and 16. And Dyer is being encouraged to take on 11- and 12-year-olds, but says kids that young are too small to carry the backpacks and too emotionally undeveloped to benefit much from weeks in the woods.

Kids referred to the program from the juvenile justice system, Dyer says, bring a gangster mentality that has prompted policies to control violence and emotional abuse. Instructors must now be certified to administer medications as well.

This year, instructors were assigned cell phones. The woods have changed, and new rules and roads in the back country are encroaching on the journey.

The phones are an intrusion on the self-reliance that instructors preach to their students. Dyer hoped to receive only three calls from each crew during their course. Instead, the base camp receives as many as 15 calls a day.

“It’s becoming more of a violent dance,” he says. “We can’t follow the belief system we used in the ‘80s and early ‘90s.”

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After 17 days in the woods, the nine young women in Crew 5 march back into base camp and, in a matter of minutes, help one another climb the 14-foot wall behind the school.

“When you asked our biggest fears,” says Alicia, whose history has taken her from a drug-abusive mother through four foster families, “mine was the wall.”

Takisha, the angry girl from Long Lane, cries when the rest of the crew credits her with the strategy that gets the last member of the crew over the obstacle.

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All students and staff form a circle before the ``marathon'' -- the program's last challenge. As Lohmann gives the runners their final instructions, a pair of great blue herons flies overhead, then doubles back to let their fledgling catch up.

Josh, the Bridgeport youth who had bragged of his drug dealing, plans to set a record for the students in the 8 1/2-mile run through the woods of East Hartland. He is well ahead of the rest of the students for the first few miles.

Yet Josh's rebellious consumption of unpurified water -- against the orders of his instructors -- now forces him into the woods to relieve his diarrhea.

Phil crosses the finish line more than 2 minutes ahead of Josh. By then, the two have had a rough history: Phil has stopped bunking with Josh, complaining that he was being threatened.

Later that afternoon, while students are cleaning their gear, Josh pushes Phil over his backpack and kicks him viciously in the neck. By the time an instructor pulls Josh away, Phil is unconscious.

He is taken by ambulance to Hartford Hospital while staff members isolate Josh from the rest of the students. When the kids form the large chow circle before their banquet, a state police cruiser pulls into base camp to investigate.

``A lot of people made progress in our crew," says Lucksinger, the instructor, still shaken and a little depressed. ``But the person who made the most progress is in the hospital now and that gets to me."

Eight feet away, though, is the sort of success these instructors work so hard to foster. Alicia tells how the 36 hours she spent solo in the woods changed her.

“I had thought I was the worst person in the world, but from that point on, I liked myself,” she recalls. “I’m going to be the first person in my family to go to college. The first person to graduate from high school in 20 years.”

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Twenty days after their arrival at the *Wilderness School*, the 21 students who remain wait with their crews as their parents, social workers and friends arrive for graduation.

Phil is back from his night in the hospital. His family has decided not to press charges in the assault, so Josh is there, too. Josh talks of celebrating his release from Long Lane with a bottle of liquor on his front porch.

“I’m going to drink it all as soon as I get home,” he boasts.

The boys wear shorts and T-shirts like they did on the trail, but the girls are wearing summer gowns or dress slacks. In their final crew circle, instructors Chris Lee and Danielle Lucia give each student a beaded bracelet, then recap her successes to the group.

Kate cries quietly as she puts on her bracelet. Monica, who sits head in hands with her back to the crew, throws hers to the ground.

“That’s OK,” Lucia says. “But I’m still going to talk about her.”

When attention turns to another student, Monica picks her bracelet up from the dirt and slides it onto her wrist.

“The heaviest thing in those backpacks are the issues they’ve been working on,” says Dyer, the director, as he begins the graduation ceremony.

Each instructor has made notecards to help express how heavy those issues have been, but Wiebe, a veteran of several graduations, hasn’t been able to come up with the right words. He steps in front of the crowd, shoves his notes in his pocket and

improvises.

“I guess the most important thing I can say about the course is this is hard,” he says. “It's 25-years hard.”

One at a time, each pair of instructors introduces their students. A few kids respond to staff shouts for a speech, but most just smile when they receive their certificate and T-shirt.

After Phil's turn, he sits reading his diploma until he hears Josh's name called.

He looks up at the young man who kicked him into unconsciousness the day before. He applauds.