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THERAPY IN NORTH GEORGIA'S MOUNTAINS

Teens learn to face consequences at reform school

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SUCHES — Every kid at this reform school recites the behavior that landed them at the Spartan camp in the North Georgia mountains. Confessing their shortcomings — restated in the affirmative, of course — might not come easy, but they get a lot of practice.

"My goals are to have positive coping skills and to control my frustration," said Tori, a 13-year-old girl from Dalton.

"My goal is to manage anger without aggression and to not steal and lie and cheat," said 13-year-old Jessica, who is here from England.

It's somewhat like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, but the kids seem less sure they need the intervention.

Spiraling and foundering or experimenting and acting out. Won't go to school and won't try once they are there. Such phrases describe the inaugural class at Eckerd Youth Alternative, a \$220-a-day private program for teens with emotional, academic and behavior problems. The small, 4-month-old camp, affiliated with a larger program based in Florida, hopes to more than triple its enrollment, now at eight boys and six girls.

Eckerd does not take court-appointed cases, a distinction that organizers say separates them from the more publicized state-run "boot camps" to help teens avoid prison. At such camps, an in-your-face approach is not only acceptable, it's the norm.

Instead, Eckerd bills itself as a therapeutic program that parents freely choose when they think their kids are approaching serious problems. The program focuses on things students do well and teaches them coping skills for when things don't go so well, director Tim McMahon said.

Counselors don't punish kids who break rules, but the children face natural consequences, McMahon

said. No one does push-ups for getting to breakfast late. Instead, a student might get a lukewarm breakfast.

Kids go to school most of the day, and do chores and meet with their counselors and peer groups twice a day. Every couple of months or so, the program has Parents Day, where families tour the facility, hear from their kids, then have a long weekend away from camp as a family.

On a recent Parents Day, the natural beauty of the environment, the warm hugs between parents and kids, and the smell of chicken barbecuing on an outdoor grill would have you think you were at a summer camp for the best and brightest.

Andrew Sherman, 17, had logged only about a month at the camp and didn't yet qualify for a home visit back to Acworth.

So the home visit had to come to him, with his parents and sister renting a cabin nearby for the weekend.

Andrew frequently skipped classes at Kell High School, lost his driver's license, briefly ran away from home and dabbled with illegal drugs.

"After a week of being a little bit anxious about my new surroundings, I adjusted quickly and am excited to be here," he said. "The atmosphere is great, there are no distractions and you get one-on-one time with teachers. Plus I get to work on my life skills."

Students who improve their behavior and their attitudes earn a ticket out of this scenic but sparse existence.

To call the living facilities "cabins" makes them sound more charming than they are. They are small, room enough for four cots, two on either wall lined up next to each other, a gas heater, a few teddy bears, and almost nothing else. There are two cabins for the girls, separate from the two for the boys. Live-in counselors have a cabin in both areas.

The floors and walls are unfinished particleboard, stark and bare. One television is on site, and it's for the Super Bowl and to show one movie a month on. Cellphones don't work at the camp.

Claire Holland, 17, of Valdosta is the senior student here in terms of longevity, and she might be here months more. It all depends on when she meets her goals of performing better in school and improving the relationship with her parents.

"I really don't want to stay the summer," she said with her parents sitting beside her.

But if she does, she could be academically caught up when she goes home.

"Oh, that would be such a great achievement," said her dad, Mike Holland.

"Let's just say that is yet to be decided," said her mom, Phyllis.

Claire rolled her eyes, but not for long. Getting along with her parents, after all, is one her must-dos.

There were no visible signs that any of the kids dislike Eckerd.

"Kids typically are angry when they get here, angry at their parents for sending them away, angry at us for being here, just angry," McMahon said. "We address that on Day One, asking them why they are here and helping them with their initial treatment plan, then their master plan.

Though hundreds of families rave about residential programs such as this one, others have horror stories.

Julia Scheeres, author of a best-selling memoir, "Jesus Land," will beg any parent who'll listen to not believe slick brochures and a program director's word.

Scheeres, now 41, spent a year in a religious-based reform school in the Dominican Republic along with her adopted brother, David. Her parents sent them there from their Indiana home when Julia was 17.

At the school, she witnessed physical abuse regularly and lived in a constant state of fear and depression.

"Some kids, who are deep in drugs or other bad crimes, may find these places work," she said. "But for kids like me and my brother — who simply didn't get along with our parents and were doing normal teenage rebellions — they do far more harm than good. I no longer have a relationship with my parents."

Scheeres is quick to point out that she has no knowledge of Eckerd. She just wants to tell parents to fully investigate any program before sending kids away.

Eckerd has had hundreds of kids come and go through its program over the past 40 years, but its record isn't spotless.

In 2000, 12-year-old Michael Wiltsie died at the Ocala, Fla., camp after being physically restrained by a 300-pound counselor. Though Florida juvenile justice authorities were critical of Eckerd, no criminal charges were filed.

McMahon also has first-hand experience with tragedy. He was the camp director at the Appalachian Wilderness Camp in 2005 when Travis Parker, 13, died at the state-run camp for troubled boys near Cleveland. Six people were initially charged with murder in Travis' death. McMahon was never charged. He did testify in court that his review of the incident found all the workers properly applied a restraint hold on Travis and didn't use excessive force. Charges against everyone were dropped.

McMahon cringed at Eckerd being compared to Appalachian. He again stressed how Eckerd isn't a boot camp and doesn't accept kids not suited for its program.

Pat Sherman, Andrew's mom, said that was a big factor in their decision, and she's pleased so far.

"I've never seen him take leadership like he is now," she said while Andrew took her and sister Rachel on a tour of the camp.

"He is far more relaxed and responsible. It's always tough to send your kid somewhere, but we had given him an ultimatum."

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