By Patti Zielinski

Into the Wild

Adolescents and young adults find the healing they need by getting back to basics in nature with Open Sky Wilderness Therapy.

Suffering with a chronic illness, *National Geographic* writer Edward Readicker-Henderson frequently ventured into the wilderness seeking healing that can only come from within — and wrote about the power that nature wields in resilience. "In the end, that's what sound the world makes: one of reassurance," he writes in *Quiet*, his book on spending long stretches of time in the wild. "I hike to where I see nothing but the bruise blue of the distant mountains, and simply hear. At least for a little while. Longer than yesterday, longer than the day before. And that's a hopeful thing, because what the world is telling me in these sounds is that any time I remember to pay attention, it will be there, singing to itself and to anybody else who wants to listen."

Leaving the world behind to find one's self is a time-honored concept. For centuries, spiritual teachers have sought guidance and direction in nature's classroom — far away from worldly distractions.

Something profoundly resonant happens when you remove yourself from your social group, from work or school, from technology and all of modern life's convenience, when you just drop out and enter the wilderness for several months.

You discover who you are. You heal — in a sustainable way. You build a toolkit for the rest of your life.

Every year since 2006, Open Sky Wilderness Therapy has been taking hundreds of struggling adolescents and young adults up to age 28 from across the globe into its programs in the

mountains of Southwest Colorado and the canyonlands of Southeast Utah to help them understand their worth and build life-lasting coping skills.

Bringing together clinical therapy, yoga, meditation and mindfulness, the program incorporates another essential component not often found in the wilderness therapy model: family. "Families are the foundation of the therapeutic process," says Tony Issenmann, Open Sky's family services director and clinical director. "Research shows that the gains teens and young adults make are greater in the short and long term when their parents are intently involved in the therapeutic process."

Open Sky founder Aaron Fernandes, who has worked in the fields of outdoor education and wilderness therapy since 1999, understands firsthand how powerful the combination of Mother Nature, plus mothers and fathers can be. During his years in the business, he watched the transformations that resulted when people returned from a time in nature. Convinced, he suggested wilderness therapy to his brother, who was struggling. "The experience had such a profound impact on him and it gave me a unique perspective on the important role of the family," he says. "However, the typical wilderness model was: a child is having problems, so the parents send him to wilderness therapy, where he would be 'fixed' and returned to the parents. I realized the parents needed to be part of the treatment."

Fernandes decided to start a program that taught parents the skills they needed to strengthen their own relationships and, in turn, build a stronger family environment.

It's a formula that works, based on results of Open Sky's research using the Youth Outcome Questionnaire, surveys completed by students and their parents at 3, 6, 12, 18 and 24 months after graduation. The students reported significantly stronger skills in coping with substance abuse, relapse and addictive behaviors, and reported stronger abstinence-focused coping

skills by the end of treatment. They maintained those gains for the duration of the surveys.

"When they enroll, students are experiencing a level of distress on par with their peers who are being hospitalized. When they are discharged, their level of distress as rated by themselves and their parents is similar to that of typical adolescents," Issenmann says. "That's dramatic."

HOW WILDERNESS THERAPY WORKS

Open Sky students enter the program diagnosed with a range of disorders, including depression, anxiety and substance use disorders and are not skilled at managing their emotional experience, Issenmann says. "In their home environment, they are able to distract from the reality of their situation — through drug use, cutting behaviors, the internet, video games and inappropriate relationships. Within the program, they have healthy relationships. They are free from substances and technology," he explains. "The wilderness allows them to experience themselves in a way that they've chosen not to for a long time. We teach them how to compassionately reconnect with themselves and learn from their experience of what their body is telling them."

The program is work. There's the ever-changing weather, long stretches of walking, learning to live without furniture, a bed or bathroom facilities. Students must understand in short-order how to take care of themselves in primitive ways.

Divided into intimate cohorts of eight to 10 members, the students live together 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with field guides who have training in areas such as substance abuse and de-escalation skills. The program's length is based on an individual's progress; the average being between 9 and 11 weeks.

During this time, the students move between base camp, a rugged "home away from home," and expeditions with field guides in which they practice basic survival skills, and in doing so, learn

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more about themselves and how to relate to others with compassion and respect. "When we are off on 'expos' — as we call them — we are engaging in hiking and wilderness survival skills," says Issenmann. "By facing the challenges of nature, students build confidence and self-reliance."

The cohorts are banded together into a community that focuses on fulfilling basic human goals of eating when hungry, staying dry and warm, supporting each other when challenges arise and learning how to get along by sharing expectations.

There is little difference between being on expedition and living at base camp. "Base camp is not the life of luxury — it is set in the remote wilderness without structures or modern conveniences of any kind," Issenmann says. "However, it is a comfortable, familiar place where students can reset after returning from expeditions that push their limits. At base camp, they can reintegrate those skills and receive the therapeutic components of the program."

Two days a week, clinical therapists visit base camp to meet with students for individual and group sessions and plan for the coming week with the field guides.

"Regardless of the task — whether it is cooking on the fire or hiking — the intention is not to get from Point A to Point B but for them to be mindful of the challenges that arise as they perform the activity," says Issenmann. "Rather than focusing on just getting to Point B, we want the student to better understand why they are having an emotional and behavioral response when they are midway. Why are they frustrated? Why are they struggling? If students can understand their own experience in the midst of a task, they can generalize that experience to other challenges that they have in their daily life outside of the program. This will help them navigate what is within their control in the midst of challenging circumstances."

To help process what they've learned, students practice journaling and letter-writing as well as engage in mindfulness meditation and expression of their thoughts. Throughout the program, students are asked to check in with what is happening with them mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

The goal is for students to learn to make value-based decisions for themselves. "We don't want them to follow the rules for the sake of following the rules," Issenmann says. "We want them to look beyond feeling better in the moment."

This peer group is an essential component. In many cases, Open Sky is the first time that students are surrounded by positive peers who are invested in their therapeutic process and recovery. "This is especially true for students who have been in group therapy with peers who did not take it seriously, which, in turn, impacted their ability to show up as well," Issenmann says.

Students are positively motivated — an attitude that helps incoming members who might be skeptical about how this treatment is different than others they tried. New students quickly realize

OPEN SKY TESTIMONY FOR RECOVERY CAMPUS – STUDENT

On April 14 of 2015, I came to Open Sky Wilderness Therapy. I was extremely sick physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually from years of alcohol and drug abuse. Prior to attending Open Sky Wilderness Therapy, I could not hold down a job, pass college classes or maintain healthy relationships with my friends and family. My life was in shambles and completely unmanageable. I spent three months at Open Sky backpacking, working through my addictions and healing broken relationships. In the wild, I was able to find joy and serenity from within that I didn't know was possible. I learned how to live within a community. Most importantly, I learned that I had the ability to exist sober and happy. Because Open Sky is a mindfulness based program, I was able to cultivate a strong meditation and yoga practice. This was integral for me. Today, my life looks totally different than it once did. I have maintained sobriety since arriving at Open Sky, I am a straight A student, valued family member and reliable friend. I work at two different treatment centers in Arizona, and I am a certified yoga instructor. In addition, I consistently venture into nature. I truly believe that Open Sky Wilderness Therapy was the only way for me to heal. I am forever grateful to everyone who I worked with at Open Sky.

-Emily, 24

how wilderness therapy offers a new type of experience from the feedback and support they receive from their peers. Students give affirmations and hold each other accountable about things that matter. "They don't just work the program to get out," Issenmann says.

ENGAGING FAMILIES

While the students are undergoing treatment, therapists work with families to help them understand their loved one's behaviors and create individualized treatment plans. Beyond this, there are a variety of opportunities for family involvement. During Wellness Weekend — which lasts from Friday night through Sunday afternoon — families are taught skills that help them become better aware of how they relate to others. "This is a time for them to learn more about themselves and start to forge a stronger basis as a family," Issenmann says.

The Family Quest is a three-day event in which families work on clinical issues that are specific to them with a therapist and senior field guide. In addition, families receive two weekly calls: one with their primary therapist and another with a family services therapist who talks with them about their unique dynamic and ways that they can support the growth of the family. Open Sky also has developed workbooks to help families develop the skills they learn.

At graduation, families are invited to spend the night in the field and meet the students in the peer group. In the first 24 hours after graduation, the families meet in person with a transition mentor to assess progress. An on-call service is available for 48 hours after graduation.

"Families overwhelmingly report back to us about how profound their experience was," says Fernandes. "By bringing the family into the equation, parents personally undergo a transformation in how they see their kids and themselves. They understand how their own upbringing or parenting styles are a reflection of the issues the family faces. It's a level of awareness that opens them up. They feel more prepared to parent their child and gain perspective about their role and their ability to use coping and communication skills."

When students see their parents engaged in a personal process, it has a positive impact in the way in which they view themselves and their families. "The family programs allow parents to be vulnerable and acknowledge that they are part of this bigger system that has an impact on their child," Fernandes says. "This level of connection sets the student and the family up for longer term success."

After graduation, students move to the level that is the next logical step for them, whether it is transitional living, another treatment facility, home, college or work. "Of course, students have a variety of experiences after leaving the program, but as we follow them over two years, they overwhelmingly sustain their gains over time," says Fernandes. "Students and parents tell us it is the best they ever felt."