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Giving teens skills for a better life WNC outdoor program helps troubled youths get past issues



photo: Photos by Ewart Ball/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Students head into the woods at SUWS of the Carolinas, a therapeutic camping program in Old Fort. "We use the wilderness to challenge these kids to take them out of their comfort zone," said field instructor Todd Ransdell. "When you see them succeeding with outdoor skills, you see a change in behavior as well."

What is outdoor behavioral health care?

- Outdoor behavioral health care is an intervention and treatment approach to help adolescents overcome emotional, adjustment, addiction and psychological problems. Aspen's Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Programs are intensive clinical interventions designed to provide families with a short-term, high-impact experience that serves as a catalyst for positive change.
- Outdoor programs like SUWS of the Carolinas employ traditional therapies in an alternative setting to remove distractions and promote learning through natural consequences. Using the wilderness environment to facilitate the therapeutic process, SUWS' licensed therapists and trained staff serve as supportive guides in helping students to reveal and address problem behaviors and foster personal and social responsibility and emotional growth. This is a transformational experience that allows underachieving youth to learn new behavioral skills and develop healthy self-esteem through character development.
- Successful clinical assessment and treatment is achieved through a combination of individual and group therapy sessions, group living with peers and a challenging experiential educational curricula. A strong family systems perspective guides all treatment and aims to restore family functioning and support through parenting seminars, online education and other interaction.

Web Extras

- [Todd Ransdell talks about the impact of the wilderness on students.](#)
- [Todd Ransdell talks about the role of SUWS.](#)
- [Todd Ransdell talks about the skills students learn through SUWS.](#)

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By Michael Flynn

STAFF WRITER

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Editor's note: The Citizen-Times is not using the full names of the student and student's mother because this is a story about a camp that treats teens with behavioral and emotional problems.

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OLD FORT - Back home in Ohio, 17-year-old Nick said he did time in a detention center and was in and out of rehabilitation facilities.

"None of them worked well, but I didn't really give them much of a chance," he said. About four weeks into a six-week therapeutic camping program operated by SUWS of the Carolinas, however, Nick said he has discovered a sense of accomplishment and purpose in his life.

"We're doing hard (primitive) skills, but there's so much meaning to them," he said about learning to make a backpack, shelter and fire. "I'm learning more about myself."

Established in 2000, SUWS of the Carolinas is an outdoor program for 14- to- 17-year-olds experiencing behavioral and emotional problems such as low self-esteem, drug and alcohol use, defiant behavior, attention deficit disorder or depression.

Located in a former Boy Scout camp on the edge of Pisgah National Forest in Old Fort, the grounds include a 10-acre main campus and about 80 acres of woods where students spend two- or three-week stretches living in self-made shelters learning wilderness skills.

"The curriculum is based on a search-and-rescue metaphor," said executive director Graham Shannonhouse. "It empowers kids to make healthier choices and recognize their potential. The main thing we want kids walking out of here with is the recognition that they have something to give."

Enrollment in the program has increased about 20 percent in recent years to about 400 students a year, Shannonhouse said, with more growth anticipated. SUWS of the Carolinas recently established an outdoor behavioral program for 11- to- 13-year-olds known as SEASONS, and is considering establishing another program for students who have completed the outdoor curriculum.

Nick's mother Carla said after an educational consultant suggested SUWS of the Carolinas, she spoke several times with staff members.

"They were very forthright and direct and interested in helping" her son, she said. "That's what struck a chord with me more than anything."

John Santa, co-owner of a therapeutic boarding school in Montana and chairman of the board of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, said the growing number of outdoor programs around the country reflects their efficacy.

"They have become an important tool in stopping the downward slide in some children," he said. "It's an intervention that gets their attention and teaches them some skills and puts them on the right course."

Life lessons

SUWS of the Carolinas is part of the Aspen Education Group, a California-based company operating about 30 therapeutic programs in 11 states that assisted more than 3,000 troubled and at-risk adolescents in 2004.

In addition to the SUWS program in Old Fort, the Aspen group operates five therapeutic education programs in Western North Carolina, including residential schools New Leaf Academy in Hendersonville and the Stone Mountain School in Black Mountain.

Students come to the SUWS program in Old Fort from around the East Coast and the rest of the country, Shannonhouse said, and the average stay is about 48 to 50 days. A monthlong program costs about \$12,900, and staff members can assist in obtaining financing.

"The majority of these kids have been to multiple mental health care providers before coming here, and they've had varying degrees of limited success in an outpatient environment," said Eric Garland, one of nine therapists among a core SUWS of the Carolinas staff of about 25 persons.

With the continuous interaction and observation in the program, Garland said, "We can determine what coping mechanisms they use to deal with their life circumstances, and more often than not, they are self-destructive."

Field instructor Todd Ransdell said most of the SUWS students have no outdoor experience and many are from large metropolitan areas.

"We use the wilderness to challenge these kids to take them out of their comfort zone," he said. "They've got to look within to find the inner strength to Field instructor Todd Ransdell said most of the SUWS students have no outdoor experience and many are from large metropolitan areas.

"We use the wilderness to challenge these kids to take them out of their comfort zone," he said. "They've got to look within to find the inner strength to overcome challenges.

"When you see them succeeding with outdoor skills, you see a change in behavior as well."

According to a study conducted by the University of Idaho in which the Aspen Education Group participated, 83 percent of students in outdoor health care programs showed clinically significant reductions in the severity of behavioral and emotional symptoms.

Leaders said the "SUWS" name reflects its beginnings as a wilderness survival school founded in Idaho more than 20 years ago, but the program has evolved into a nurturing and supportive intervention, and is not a boot camp or survival program.

Family members are involved throughout their child's stay, including via a private Web site updated with photos and other postings, and final therapy sessions with the students and parents.

"This is not a 'fix your kid and send them home' program," said Amy Sandler, manager of marketing and communications at Aspen. "It's a family process -you're really treating the whole family."

Foster said written communication with her son and the online updates reveal the progress he is making. "The staff has to make them want to give 110 percent, and they certainly have done that with Nick," she said. "I know he's going to continue to show great progress because his counselor is incredible, and Nick is working really hard, too."

Despite the daily challenges students face, Nick said there's a lighter side as well. "It's hard work, but it's also fun," he said. "My group is like my family."

Nick said the lessons he has learned in the program will stay with him. "You find out the things you learn are so important," he said. "This is a life lesson - how could you forget it?"

Aspen's outdoor behavioral programs in WNC

- SUWS of the Carolinas, Old Fort: An outdoor behavioral health care program for students ages 14 to 17. The wilderness setting removes distractions and teaches lessons that enable students to accept personal responsibility and address issues through traditional therapeutic methods.
- SEASONS, Old Fort: A program that offers 11- to- 13-year-olds a stimulating, concrete and clinical program in the outdoors. SEASONS is designed for the needs of younger students - safety, security and predictability - and provide tangible experiences that serve as a foundation for future success.
- Talisman Summer Programs, Black Mountain: Special learning camps for children ages 8 to 17 with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning differences, Asperger's syndrome and high-functioning autism. For 25 years, Talisman has provided adventure and educational alternatives for students with special needs.

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