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## **Red Cliff Ascent offers therapy and a little tough love**

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*Editor's Note: Students' names have been changed to protect their identity.*

After "Holes," Louis Sachar's award-winning novel-turned-movie, hit the theaters, audiences got only one perception of wilderness therapy - a harsh discipline with a drill sergeant-type dishing out more curses than kisses, little food, little water, and a kick to the rear to get you in gear.

This isn't the case for Red Cliff Ascent, a wilderness therapy program based out of Enterprise. An intensive inpatient treatment program, Red Cliff Ascent combines wilderness survival skills with traditional therapy and, of course, a little tough love.

You see, most of the students are brought here as a last resort. They're juvenile delinquents and troubled children of a tough sort, and their parents decided it came down to this to keep them out of jail.

"The parents sign over their power of attorney and consent to treat their child," said Andrea Burgess, executive director of Red Cliff. This is much like when a parent signs a consent form for doctors to treat their child in the emergency room. For a majority of the students, their stay at Red Cliff begins much like a drop-off to summer camp. The parents bring their child to the main office, or "base" of Red Cliff, in Enterprise.

"Intake" - the check in of the child into treatment - is where the party really begins. The child goes through drug and HIV testing, routine work to "avoid any unsuspected medical issues," said Steve Schultz, spokesman for Red Cliff Ascent.

The student is then read his rights and responsibilities as a student at Red Cliff Ascent. "As staff, we agree to treat (the student) with the utmost dignity and respect," said Jared Priebe, intake coordinator. "We expect that same respect back from them."

Protocol for intake also includes a strip search for drugs or other items the student may be smuggling in. "We ask them to undress clear down to their underwear and do a very thorough check for contraband," Priebe said.

The intake team also takes careful note of the student's height, weight, body fat, body mass index and resting heart rate and check for lice. These stats are strictly monitored every week the student is in the field to document any physical change as well as any psychiatric change.

The student is stripped of all belongings, including piercings, which are tallied and stored away in a bin at base offices. The student will get his belongings back only when he graduate from Red Cliff.

"We basically outfit them from the skin out," said Scott Schill, Red Cliff field director.

Not all students are compliant at the intake, as Priebe will attest. He used to work for a "transport service," which is basically a team hired by the parents to bring the child to rehab programs by

force. Transport service companies are strictly regulated and completely independent of Red Cliff.

"I was escorted (out of the house) at 4 a.m.," said Alyssa Quock, a former student at Red Cliff and a native of Santa Rosa, Calif. "They came and picked me up without my knowledge. My dad had set it up. I had no idea people could take you out of your house unless you were being arrested. They just said, 'Grab a jacket and let's go.'"

Priebe said when the students arrive at Red Cliff, some are ready for a fight.

"We use what's called 'positive control systems,' which is control with a small degree of pain," Priebe said. "Hands-on is a last resort unless there's immediate danger ... when all's said and done, it's all about the student."

The student is taken to the warehouse and issued clothes and appropriate survival gear. Students are given a set of food rations, which will be replenished once a week. The diet is a minimum of 3,000 calories per day in the form of a whole grain, high-fiber diet supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables twice a week.

After a student is completely outfitted, he is blindfolded before the driver takes them to "the field" - the 168 square miles of wilderness that belongs to Red Cliff, including nearly 500 acres of Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service land that Red Cliff pays user fees for each year.

"A lot of the staff tell them they're being blindfolded so they can't see where they're going, so they won't run away," Priebe said. "The way I see it, the blindfold is symbolic of closing your old life. When you take that blindfold off, you're in a new life."

The staff believes therapy really begins here, removing the markings and paraphernalia and conveniences from the student. This comes as a nasty shock to the students, who come from families of all incomes and from all over the United States and overseas.

Though some of these students come from comfortable homes, the cost of treatment at Red Cliff makes no small financial dent in the family funds. Some parents dip out of their child's college funds to pay for treatment, because wilderness therapy doesn't fall under traditional health insurance.

"Unless you're in four walls with a psychiatrist, feeding them a bunch of meds, they won't cover it," Burgess said.

Red Cliff costs \$440 per student per day, and falls to \$220 per day after 60 days. There's a one-time charge of \$500 for gear and equipment. Luckily, parents can apply for a special-needs student loan through Key Bank to cover the cost.

"In other inpatient programs in hospitals, treatment can cost from \$800 to \$1,000 per day," Schultz said. "I know this is more cost effective."

Besides the financial assets, one of Red Cliff's greatest assets is its approximately 65 staff members - the guides who spend entire weeks out on the trail with the students.

"They treat us like gold as staff," said Lori Purves, a staff member. "They want us to know that they value us and they're always offering us more training."

The staff spends a week in the field and then a week off, a "six day weekend," as Purves puts it. And she says it's worth it.

"You can't put a price on sleeping under the stars and sitting around a campfire," she said.

With the recent rise in popularity of wilderness programs, Red Cliff is always on the lookout for more staff members.

"We're more in competition for competent staff than for clients," Burgess said.

Staff sign a six-month minimum contract, spending every other week eating the same food and getting as dirty as the students.

"You're your raw self out here," said Brooke Beesley, one of the staff members. "There's nothing to hide."

The same can be said of the student. What's left is just the child, not the protective shell they've created for themselves.

Another of Red Cliff's greatest assets are their clinical team, the eight therapists who travel around the field to do therapy with each student once a week.

"We also meet weekly as a clinical team to work on our abilities to sufficiently manage those types of kids," said Dan Sanderson, clinical director of Red Cliff. "It's not just one therapist out there flying by the seat of their pants. We're a cohesive unit."

One of the major things that separate Red Cliff from other wilderness therapy programs is that it's a program of completion. The student is released from therapy when the therapist determines that they're ready, not a day before. Students stay in the field an average of 73 days.

But it's not about breaking the kids down. It's about giving them the tools and the strength to build themselves back up.

"We're not changing the kids," Purves said. "We're presenting them with opportunities to change themselves."