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## **Red Cliff Ascent makes troubled teens solve their own problems**

By LAURIE FROST  
[lauriejfrost@gmail.com](mailto:lauriejfrost@gmail.com)

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

Andrew leaned back against a log and stared into the flames, his eyes half-hidden beneath a fringe of shaggy blond hair.

He looks about the same as he did when he left his home on the West Coast about a month ago. He's tall and strong, and pitched an 85 mph fastball - left-handed - before the coach kicked him off the team for smoking pot. Andrew's parents checked him in to wilderness therapy at Red Cliff Ascent shortly afterward, and they won't bring him home until he's completed the program.

Now he's tired. He's frustrated and dusty, the red dirt caking to the seat of his standard issue blue long johns as he finally spoke up. "You know what I hate about this?" he asked. "I hate how you don't have any choices here."

Another student named Joel chuckled mirthlessly. He's been at Red Cliff even longer than Andrew, also for drug use.

"You did have choices," he said, leaning on his elbow. "You just smoked them all away."

By Red Cliff standards, Andrew's story isn't unique. Nor has he been there long. Of Red Cliff's 82 juveniles, the average has stayed 73 days, and they're in therapy for everything from drugs and sex to lying and disrespect. In fact, there are few psychological issues the Red Cliff clinical team hasn't faced here in the wilderness.

"We look at the student to determine what they're doing to avoid progression in life and we deal with students who are very savvy in it," said Dan Sanderson, clinical director of Red Cliff. "It's as if they're on a developmental vacation."

"Developmental vacation" is a phrase coined by Sanderson to describe a juvenile who, in short, refuses to mentally and emotionally develop and accept responsibility for their actions. This is a common thread among most of the students at Red Cliff.

"(Troubled kids are) hanging onto the capacity to be more of a problem to everyone in their world rather than solving the problem in their world," Sanderson said. "They're used to having the focus of the entire community on them."

One of the first things the therapists and staff teach the students is the "six ego states" - the six stages through which the child must progress, mentally and emotionally, to reach adulthood. The ego states are in a stair-step order, with the first being "natural child," the ego state where the student is completely dependent on others for emotional and even physical support.

Next is the "adaptive child," where the student will be totally compliant to the staff's requests,

regardless of whether they want to or not. This ego state, though submissive, is regarded as a hindrance to the student's progression because they're hiding their true feelings and avoiding emotional change.

"We almost want them to resist us," said Tray, a staff member. "It shows that they're really open to what they're really feeling."

The next ego state is the "rebellious child," where the student refuses to comply with authority. Students in this ego state refuse to practice their survival skills - such as hiking or learning to make fire with a bow drill set - or participate in group activities.

"When I first got here, I just pretended," said Darcey, a student. "I pretended to bow (fires), I pretended to do my phase work. I procrastinated for 50 days."

"Little professor" is the next ego state. These students are typically those who will try to buddy up to the staff and use manipulation to get their own way.

"One student will use crying to plagiarize your sensitivity," Tray said. "Some students are master manipulators and up to this point, no one in their life has called them on it."

It's for this reason the staff is encouraged to be kind to the student, but not to act like a parent or a buddy.

"You can set up a friendship, but it has to be professional," said Brooke Beesley, a staff member. "If it gets personal, students will feel like we owe stuff to them."

Next is the "critical parent" ego state.

"A 'critical parent' is the student who feels the need to punish and talk down to others," said Jordan Green, a staff member.

The last ego state is the "nurturing parent," the student who will try to fix others' problems without paying attention to their own.

Students aren't the only ones who struggle with these ego states. Often staff members start working at Red Cliff with a "nurturing parent" propensity.

"It's hard not to be nurturing," Tray said. "It's that struggle that makes them stronger. If we're too quick to encourage them, it can impede them."

This doesn't mean there is no kindness here for the students. The staff learns to be sensitive to the students' needs and may step in to help them in small ways.

For example, Tray spends a lot of time with the Coyotes, a group that tends to be primarily all-female, and he shows tenderness for them in a unique way - by doing their hair.

"I wash their hair for them," Tray said. "Another person can get it cleaner than they can. Then I brush and braid their hair for them." In similar ways, the staff can show affection and positive affirmation for the students.

This affirmation and affection doesn't necessarily mean the staff shoulders the students' emotional

burdens for them.

"A lot of students come with a package of problems and they want you to reassure them," said Jessica Irwin, a staff member. "You have to find a balance of being supportive and saying, 'This is your package. You keep it. You take care of it.'"

To break the cycle that the student has set for themselves and move them out of their ego state, "Doc Dan" Sanderson has a specific process for change: to remove them from their element and custom tailor disruptions to the patterns of blaming and manipulations they've set for themselves.

"Being in the wilderness teaches the student that there's natural consequences to your actions," said Justin Strum, a Red Cliff therapist. "If you choose not to build a shelter and you get wet, it's your problem."

The therapy is intermingled with teaching the students survival skills. The first major task - and incidentally the most difficult task - the students learn is making a fire with a bow drill set.

"When they try to make fire, the emotions they're trying to deal with rise to the surface almost immediately," said Steve Schultz, Red Cliff spokesman. "It brings some people to tears (with frustration). But when they do get it, it's the one thing that really excites them."

Brian, a student from the Midwest, said he believed getting fire was one of the greatest accomplishments he'd ever done.

"The first time I made fire, I worked at it and worked at it and finally got a coal," he said. "I was so happy. If my parents saw me here, I think they'd laugh. Then they'd be proud, because I'm doing something I've never done before."

After getting fire, the students must learn other skills through "phase work," such as making cordage out of juniper bark, making traps and a stone knife, all out of natural materials. These wilderness skills are interspersed with softer work for an "Exploring Values" course from Brigham Young University, which counts toward a half credit of social science at the student's high school.

"After making fire, the next phases are still hard, survival-type skills," Schultz said. "But the soft skills are therapeutic."

Students do have some physical incentive for completing their phase work - food. Students get a package of Pasta-Roni at the end of each phase, a bottle of honey for making four fires a week, a two-pound bag of M&Ms if they can make a fire with a hand drill set and two packages of Little Debbie's for their birthday.

While the students are in therapy, the therapist meets with the parents via conference call once a week to discuss their child's progress.

"Wednesdays at 11:30, that was our appointment time," remembered Lauren Houston, a native of Maryland whose daughter Stephanie graduated from Red Cliff a year ago. "I couldn't wait for Wednesdays. I missed those calls when she got home. It was so cool listening to her progress."

In the meantime, the parents are encouraged to take Family IQ classes, an online course on parenting.

"When the parents don't change (as well), treatment is futile," Strum said. As the student progresses through the program, they gain more privileges as they gain trust with the staff.

"It's a trust thing to give a kid a knife or give them a compass and tell them to leave the group on a hike," said Matt Brodt, a staff member.

This stage, Strum says, is where the changes really happen - when the student starts to make the most of their experience.

"At first they say, 'I'll do anything to get out of here,'" Strum said. "I ask them, 'Would 'anything' include change?' It makes them think for a minute, and that's where the rubber really meets the road."