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Article published Jul 31, 2006

Students find Red Cliff Ascent to be an opportunity, not a punishment

By LAURIE FROST
lauriejfrost@gmail.com

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

It's not that unique to hear a group of teenage girls belt out a pop tune at the top of their lungs.

But this is no sing-along to the radio as they drive with friends. It's a group of ragged and sunburned girls, many of whom were sent here as a last-ditch effort at reform for juvenile delinquency. And they're singing at the top of their lungs on a sandstone stage, accompanied by the wind in the cedars.

"You ain't nothin' but a pollywog," they sing through bursts of laughter, "cryin' all the time."

The audience is as dusty and sunburned as they are, but they're laughing and applauding at the "pollywog" reference - Red Cliff Ascent wilderness therapy slang for a newcomer - well after the girls tromp off the stage.

This event is "Shin dig," the quarterly sing-and-dance-off for the students at Red Cliff Ascent wilderness therapy program.

The next group - consisting of six teenage boys - gets up on stage, determined to win the prize for best song and dance: a box of Pop Tarts. They sing an off-key, Red Cliff-style version of "Kokomo," accompanied by hula arm motions.

"You ask yourself, is it worth your masculinity to compromise it for a Pop Tart?" Joel said before the performance. He grinned. "The answer is yes."

Not only does Shin Dig include a good, fatty meal - a wild departure from the bland, hearty, whole-grain fare - the staff said it's good to see these kids out here having fun and performing in the amphitheater.

"These kids have done horrible things at home, and they're out there singing and dancing in front of 100 or more people and loving every minute of it," said Andrea Burgess, executive director of Red Cliff.

Darcey, a former drug addict, just passed her 100-day mark at Red Cliff and she's one of the veterans here. She's comfortable talking about past bad behaviors for one reason - they're in the past.

"The change is unbelievable," said Jessica Irwin. "When Darcey first got here, she wouldn't do anything."

The staff believes the tables turn in the treatment when the student finally sees Red Cliff for its

opportunities for growth, rather than for discipline.

Alyssa Quock, a native of California and a graduate of Red Cliff, said a staff member finally helped her see her situation from a new perspective.

"One day we were sitting around the fire and he said, 'You were here because somebody saw something in you worth saving,'" Quock said. "Basically, I finally realized, 'Wow, I'm not out here because my dad hates me.' (Red Cliff) was an opportunity, not a punishment."

Quock buckled down and tried to learn how to make fire from a bow drill set, and it wasn't exactly easy.

"I didn't get a fire for probably a month," she said. "Usually you get a fire by then, and it took me 30-something days."

In the meantime, her dad, Stanley Quock, said the letters finally changed tone from "Dad, please rescue me" to "Dad, look what I did."

"When she finally got a fire, it was an incredible feeling for a city girl who had her nails manicured," he said. "That she could go out in the wilderness and survive and learn these skills that most adults don't know even today."

After she got a fire, Quock - who had been out approximately 40 days - took it on herself to change her position as diva of the group to leader of the pack.

"I took it upon myself to be the leader of the group because I'd been there so long," she said. "I was the youngest, I was the smallest, but (I learned how) to speak my mind."

Quock said one of the biggest changes in lifestyle she ever made, she made around the campfire at Red Cliff.

"They asked us to write one thing on a paper and throw it in the fire, something you're going to leave behind," she said. "I wrote 'alcohol.' I've been sober ever since."

Quock was out in the field for 67 days. By the time she graduated, she had completed all her phase work and earned an "Earth name," an honor only given to students who experience a major change of heart and habit in the field. The staff gave her the name "Diamond Star."

"(Red Cliff) wasn't easy for my family or me," she said. "It pushed you. I cried a lot, oh goodness, I cried a lot."

When Stanley Quock came to see his daughter graduate, he was amazed by the growth she'd experienced and what she had learned.

"When I went to graduation, they asked us (parents) to make a fire before dinner," Quock said. "I couldn't do it. They finally said, 'Your daughter can help you.' In about two minutes, poof. We had fire."

When students graduate from Red Cliff, the tradition is that they run down the trail into the arms of their parents. The experience is intensely emotional and, frankly, some parents hardly recognize

their children because they've changed so much.

"When students graduate, their parents say, 'I can look into their eyes and see them again,'" said Lori Purves, a staff member.

Lauren Houston, a native of Maryland, said she hardly recognized her daughter Stephanie - she had lost 70 pounds in the 116 days she was at Red Cliff.

"When I was standing there with a group of parents, waiting for Stephanie to come down the hill, one of the staff members said to us, 'If you see someone come down the hill and you don't recognize them, hug them anyway because we have someone in this group who's lost 70 pounds,'" Houston said. "All of the sudden, I see this little white speck come running down the hill."

Houston said she had "never in (her) life experienced anything so emotional."

"She ran into my arms, and we held onto each other for dear life and just couldn't stop crying," she said. "We must have held each other for two, three straight minutes crying."

There was more to their reunion than met the eye. Lauren Houston had found out Stephanie had been raped prior to treatment, a secret that came out while she was in therapy in a wilderness program in Idaho.

"Stephanie had been raped and we didn't know it," Houston said. "As a mother, it was very hard for me to find out she had been raped and not be there to comfort my little girl. When I found out, I was literally in my office at work, throwing up."

After the Idaho program went under, Houston transferred Stephanie transferred to Red Cliff, and just crossed her fingers.

"The first letter I got from her, I could still smell the smoke on it," Houston said. "She wrote, 'The smoke's in my eyes. They're trying to poison me. They made me drink water with crap in it.'"

Slowly the letters changed. Stephanie got fire after about 45 days. She learned to love hiking.

"I'm getting these letters saying, 'Mom, guess what? I walked six miles today and I had 60 pounds in my pack!'" Houston said. "It's amazing how all those aches and pains went away when she got into it."

Houston said Stephanie had turned totally away from her Jewish roots after she was raped. The biggest shock to Houston came when Stephanie asked for her portion of the Torah from her bat mitzvah, the coming of age celebration for Jewish girls.

"She asked for her Torah portion and I couldn't believe it," Houston said. "She asked for it right after she was (given an Earth name)." The staff at Red Cliff named Stephanie "Dreaming Willow" because "a willow knows how to bend and dreams are safe places," Houston said.

Quock said her commitment to Red Cliff continued long after she was named and graduated, but it took hard work.

"I'm just hanging in there," she said, one year after graduation. "It's an everyday commitment. It's a thing I have to think about, not going back to what I was doing and relapse into those behaviors."

(Red Cliff) works if you let it work."

Stephanie Houston suffered a minor relapse six months after graduating from Red Cliff, so her mom enrolled her in a therapeutic boarding school.

"We have bi-weekly family therapy over the phone," Houston said. "For the first time, she told me all about the rape in great detail."

Houston said when Stephanie comes home, there need to be some changes in their relationship as parent and child.

"Twenty times I say, 'I'm only going to tell you one more time,'" Houston said. "The hardest thing to do is follow through, and make my consequences realistic. I'm doing the same thing with my son, too."

Alyssa Quock said for the first time she realizes that she and her dad are going to have differences, but they're willing to meet each other halfway.

Stanley Quock says it was one of the hardest things he's ever done, but now he's willing to make changes and trust Alyssa enough to let her grow up.

"One day, I think she'll look back and say, 'Thank God my father loved me enough to save me,'" Quock said.