
Outdoor Adventures: A Natural High in Tacoma, Washington¹

Presenter:

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Program Description

Youth Outdoor Adventures, an outdoor education and recreation program targeted at inner-city, at-risk youth, was developed in 1992 with funding from the National Park Service (Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Act). Other resources have been supplied by the Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma and by a state of Washington Criminal Justice grant.

Goal

The goal of the program is to supplement other park district and youth service agency programs by:

- (1) providing positive recreational activities for youth in the outdoors;
- (2) providing quality and safe activities;
- (3) providing outdoor education, safety, and environmental awareness; and
- (4) introducing youth to recreation as a career.

Approximately 1,000 youth participate annually through various avenues. Many enter through the park district's youth outreach programs at several neighborhood community centers. Participants also come from youth service agencies, including the Pierce County Juvenile Court/Remann Hall, Eastside Boys and Girls Club, Faith Group Homes, and Children's Industrial Home/Jessie Dyslin Boys Ranch. Other youth participate through home school associations, after-school programs at Tacoma Public Schools, and other agencies.

Program Content

Youth Outdoor Adventures consists of outdoor educational skill workshops and outdoor adventure trips. *Skill workshops* occur weekly at five program sites. These 30-minute workshops introduce youth to outdoor environments, where they learn a wide range of basic outdoor skills, including such things as tent setup, hypothermia prevention, and water safety. Younger participants also learn camp songs and games while older youth focus on team-building.

Adventure trips, like the skill workshops, occur on a year-round basis. Following the public school calendar, activities range from a two-hour canoe outing at local Wapato Park after school to a full-day mountain bike ride on a nonschool day. Extended overnight trips lasting from two to six days are scheduled on weekends, nonschool days, winter and spring breaks, and during the summer vacation. All camping equipment, food, and transportation are provided, and trips are staffed by Youth Outdoor Adventures.

A unique component of this program is *Adventure Leadership Training*. This is an extension of the skill workshops and adventure trips and is targeted at youth 12-18 years old. Participants are selected based on their level of involvement in general workshops and adventure activities, interest in developing leadership skills, and a belief that they will benefit by participating in an outdoor leadership experience. Five-week classes offer participants the opportunity to become part of a team of six to ten youth. They participate in team-building games and

¹ Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

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activities, instruct and teach one another a variety of advanced outdoor skills, and help plan an adventure trip which they subsequently undertake. Following the conclusion of each session, participants instruct and lead (under staff supervision) an outing in which they teach a group of adults or other youth. For example, in a winter session, they may teach cross-country skiing skills to a group of adults and lead them on a day's outing. The program's specific objectives for 1995 were to offer 250 instructional trips and three Adventure Leadership Training Sessions. In total, the program sought to serve 3,000 participants and increase the number of Asian and female participants. Efforts were also made to develop an intergenerational program for seniors and youth.

Costs

Most programs cost \$1 to participate for a single activity and \$8 to \$12 for a camping trip. If individuals do not have the funds, they can still participate. Those who cannot pay, however, are

expected to do volunteer work to help meet some of the needs of the program. Volunteer work includes helping change bike tires, patching tents, cleaning coolers, or working around the community center.

Program Outcomes

The success of Youth Outdoor Adventures is reflected in the relationships which staff and participants share and its influence in the lives of participants. Although they come from diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds, a common thread ties participants together. Each faces challenges day after day. Poverty, drugs, alcohol, and gangs are a part of life for them. These youth survive on a daily basis. Their stories are told in Exhibits 33A, 33B (page 298), and 33C (page 299). For the youth described in the Exhibits and many others, Youth Outdoor Adventures is an experience that fosters pride, self-esteem, and success, and teaches hands-on skills. Participants develop respect for themselves, others, and the environment, often experiencing success for the first time.

Exhibit 33A

Sheilaigh is a 17-year-old single mother of two children. They live in a group home for unwed mothers. She has been in several foster homes, experienced physical and sexual abuse, and lived in poverty. But Sheilaigh and her small family enjoyed an overnight camping trip with Youth Outdoor Adventures. She swam in the calm Yakima River, went horseback riding on wooded trails, and canoed in a small lake. She is looking forward to participating in more outdoor activities with her children.

Exhibit 33B

Cory and his brothers and sisters had been in numerous foster homes, finally being reunited in one home two years ago. Their father had been killed years earlier in a drug-related incident and their mother is in a rehabilitation facility. Cory, 12, and his eldest sister, 17, walked from their new foster home to buy ice cream for his birthday. On the way, Cory's sister stopped to talk with some friends. Within that group were some known gang members. Before Cory and his sister left the group, a drive-by shooting took place. Cory's sister lay dying at his feet. That day, he lost the only mother he had ever known.

Cory showed up on a camping trip to Wenatchee State Park. He participated in river rafting, mountain biking, and camping—all new activities for him. He struggled with some of the expectations and the rules. But after a second trip, where Cory was given a chance to redeem his earlier behavior, he began to open up. He obviously had difficulty with male authority figures. He responded well, often going out of his way, to assist female staff. He was more comfortable in one-on-one activities with staff than in group activities with other youth. All of his actions pointed to a way of thinking that was not conducive to the group environment. Cory was uncomfortable-out of his element.

But that very discomfort allowed him to experience positive change in his life. He knew he was with people who cared about him. He was encouraged and recognized for the positive things he did. And he experienced thrills that will stay with him throughout his life. The smile on his face as he took a corner on a single-track bike trail was all it took to convince the staff that Cory had truly benefited from Youth Outdoor Adventures.

Exhibit 33C

Ming is a 16-year-old former gang member. He has been involved in drive-by shootings, has sold drugs to help put food on his family's table, and has seen his friends killed. He has stolen property, and he has run the streets.

River rafting, mountain biking, hiking, and lake swimming were "firsts" for Ming. Sleeping in a tent, cooking on a campstove, and sitting around a campfire roasting marshmallows were also "firsts" for Ming. His language was foul, and he wore his pants so that they sagged. He has been on numerous camping and day trips. He also has worked as an assistant on day trips with younger participants. Ming became a part of Adventure Leadership Training in the summer of 1994. Working with seven other teens, Ming became an important part of a team, showing his leadership potential when he discussed drug and gang issues with other participants. Ming was the most outstanding part of the team that session, not because of what he had done, but because of who he had become. He still struggles with the temptation, the urge, the draw to go back to the gangs. But he will not. And Ming's experience with Youth Outdoor Adventures allowed him to see something different in life. The outdoor bug has bitten Ming as well. What once was an unfamiliar environment is now comfortable for him. Ming is a likely candidate to advance through Youth Outdoor Adventures as a participant and to become a staff member.