

## **Wilderness Therapy: A Parent's Perspective on Intervention**

Anne and Sutton Roley discussed how their family decided to utilize Wilderness Camp for both of their boys for different reasons, utilizing different camps. Both boys went voluntarily even though one was a minor.

### *1. How do you know when to send your child to Wilderness Therapy?*

- A. If they are abusing drugs or alcohol (not the weekend exploration, but using substances in a way that is affecting their daily life.
- B. Communication troubles with the family.
- C. Decreased school performance.
- D. Trouble with the law.
- E. Change of sleeping pattern.

Their minor was doing fine until he started high school. He began to hole himself up in his room and stopped communicating with the family. His usual A's and B's began to tank. He began to do LOTS of sleeping and sleeping in extremely late which they later found out was because he was sneaking out and staying out very late.

### *2. Which wilderness camp?*

There are wilderness camps (survival schools) and then there are wilderness therapy programs. There are over 400 wilderness therapy programs where the teen works with a therapist involving the whole family using a whole person approach. These have an 80% success rate. Choosing can be difficult and there are educational consultants who specialize in matching the kid to the program. One such specialist is out of Los Altos. Camps can focus on substance abuse and/or anxiety or adoption issues etc. The Roley's did their own research and got double recommendations for the same camp from different professionals. They chose SUWS ( School of Urban and Wilderness Survival) in Idaho. At this school only 2 kids went voluntarily. It was more of a bare bones approach. 6 weeks and \$25,000.

Their adult child went to Open Sky which incorporated yoga and meditation and was a higher end program. 10 weeks and \$30,000.

Parents will fill out a very lengthy application providing details about all family relationships.

If your teen will not go voluntarily, then parents use "transportors". These transportors will "kidnap" the kid, usually late at night, and escort them to the camp. When they first arrive the teens are given a clinical and physical exam.

### *3. First week of Wilderness: Impact Letter and general structure*

Upon arrival at camp the kid receives an impact letter from each parent and each sibling. It is 2 pages and handwritten. It discusses 1. Their concerns. 2. Their hopes for the teen. 3. Identify issues to work on. 4. Ends with identifying positive things about the teen. Everything is from an "I feel" perspective with no finger pointing. The impact letters are reviewed by the therapist. It was noted that a lot of teens are not clear on the concerns of their parents. When the teen reads the letter, it is in front of their group and also they read it to their therapist.

They are given clothes and all of their basic necessities. The general structure is that they are woken up at 7:00am and then given their shoes back. (Shoes are removed to prevent running away) They roll up their 60 lb pack. Eat. Go through reflection time and journaling. Hike about 4-5 miles with their pack. Help make lunch, eat. Set up camp. Do their "curriculum", dinner and then circle time. 10:00 bedtime with a full body check. They are allowed a shower once/week. They are expected to eat what is served them. They learn to make a fire from scratch using a bow drill, how to read animal tracks, how to build their own shelter, make jewelry, do the ropes course, engage in equine therapy etc. In the meantime, parents are engaging with therapy at home.

There are graduated phases to the program designed to take increasing leadership working towards mentoring. SUWS is more of a military feel with no distractions. They break you down and then build you back up. You are there to repair relationships. They learn to take responsibility first for their personal hygiene, then for their gear, and then for their environment. They are there to discover themselves and to learn respect and responsibilities. If a kid tries to use their old coping skills such as having a tantrum, the counselors are trained to respond differently. For instance in response to the tantrum, the counselor will look for the positive intention and note that they see that the teen wants attention. The teen learns that their old means of dealing is not effective and they learn healthier ways to deal.

Initially the teens write to their parents and profess apologizing and understanding and the wish to come home *now*. However this is only the beginning. Therapeutic Counseling begins and continues daily. There is extensive homework for both the teen and the parents.

### *4. Last Week: Family Camp and Graduation*

For SUWS this is a 4 day, 5 night event where the parents dress in the same clothes and sleep in the same cots. Basically they experience the same life as their child. It is a tremendous bonding experience. They participate in a ropes course, hiking, games, crafts, therapy sessions. The kids do the cooking. At night there is a fire with a "truth circle" where *everyone* discusses their highs and lows for the day and use truth words.

For Open Sky they recommended all males in the family participate in "Family Quest" which was 3 days and 2 nights. There were 2 male therapists. Their adult child focused on issues of the death/loss of his mom and communication issues. Open Sky involved meditation, yoga and hiking breaks in between 8 hours of daily therapy for 3 days. Each one of them told their life story through the day and anytime there was a charged moment the therapist stopped it and asked them how they felt about it.

#### *5. After Care:*

During family camp or family quest it is critical that the whole family commits to after care. They created a family contract. Also at this time one must agree on the list of OK friends, not OK friends and the maybe OK friends. This is where you agree to have family meetings which the Roleys have structured just like the Truth Circle where they discuss the highs and the lows of the week, their goals coming up and how they did with their goals the past week. They use iChat for out of town family members. They also plan fun events for the whole family. It is critical that you do not go back to the same environment. You have got to change the pattern. They need to be in a very structured life with no hanging out. This can involve a combination of community service, church, a part time job, sports, AA meetings or a therapeutic boarding school. 90% send their teen to a therapeutic boarding school afterward. However the Roleys chose to create their own after camp experience. Their teen went to finish out the school year living in southern California with Grandma. When he returned to Los Gatos it was the night before he started summer school. One can get limited school credit for a wilderness program. The Roleys worked closely with LGHS to create a plan to ensure his graduation requirements would be met. This meant that he was going to summer school. He returned to having no free cash. They use a Life 360 GPS tracker. At 10:30 he delivers his cell phone, keys and laptop to his parents. The parents have all passwords. He is randomly drug tested. On the Internet you can get a drug test for \$2. This was all agreed upon at family camp prior to the teen leaving the camp. It was memorialized in a family contract and signed by all family members.

The Roleys stressed that Wilderness Camp was an amazing experience that every child and family would benefit from. It so benefitted their younger child that they suggested that their older child consider a similar program. He had different issues and not being a minor it was a different experience albeit of similar value.

They graciously offered to speak to any parents who are considering this path. You can contact them at [sutton.roley@ctbt.com](mailto:sutton.roley@ctbt.com)