

RITE OF PASSAGE

Celebrating 40 Years of Improving the Lives of Youth

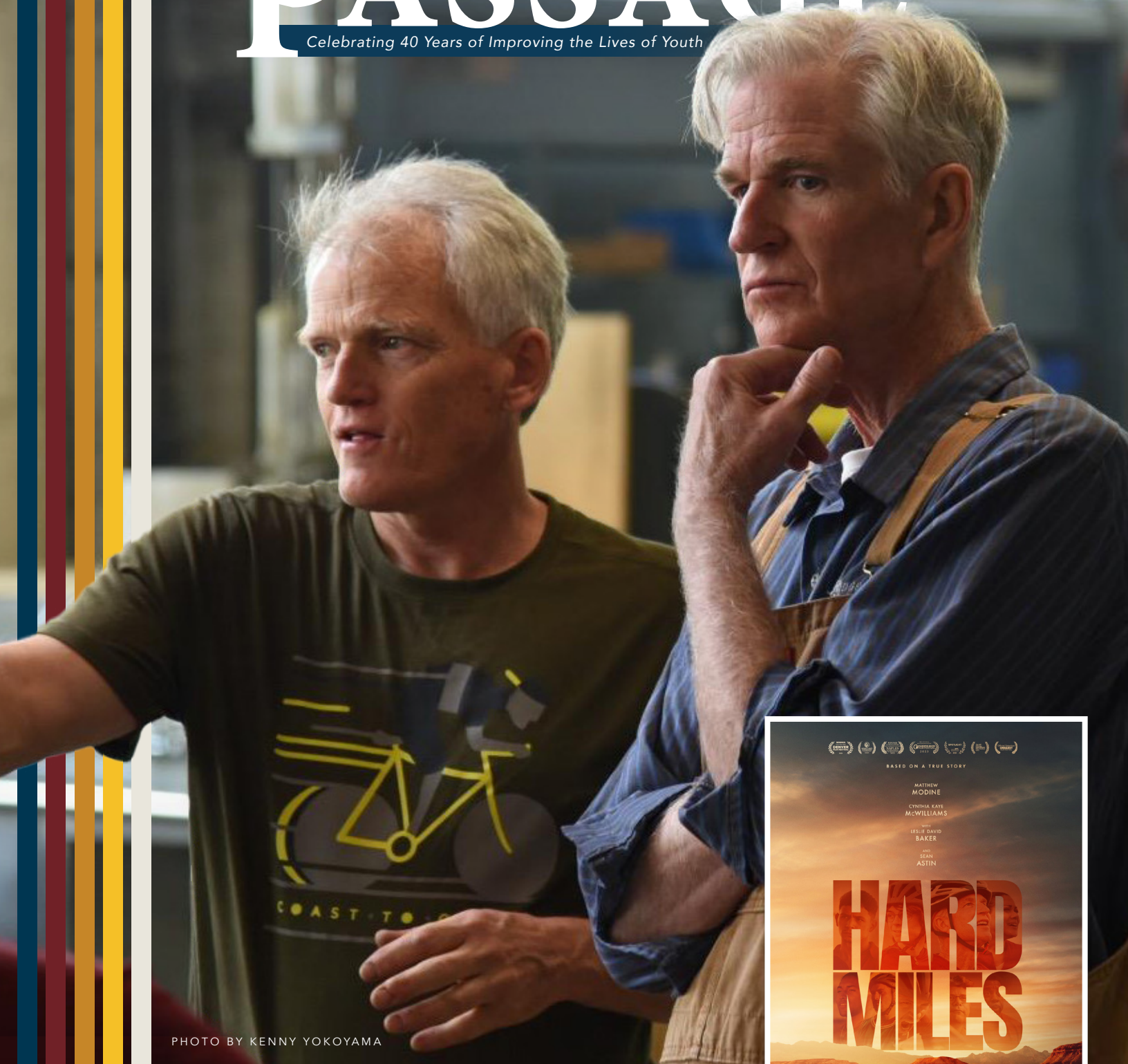


PHOTO BY KENNY YOKOYAMA

Hard Miles, the feature film from Pensé Productions, depicts the uplifting true story of the cycling team at Rite of Passage's Ridge View Academy. The film was inspired by cycling coach and youth care worker Greg Townsend (left), played onscreen by Matthew Modine (right).



W E L C O M E

In the early 1980s, Dave McGuire led Rite of Passage's first long distance bike ride from Placerville, California to Canada, with sixteen riders, seven of them counselors guiding the residents of his group home called Wimbledon House. Almost a kid myself, I was one of those counselors who embarked on an adventure. These were my first hard miles, ones that would change the course of my life and show me how I could make an impact on the lives of others.

McGuire started his group home with the idea that these boys who had been diagnosed with severe emotional problems, who had failed at other placements in the mental health and juvenile justice systems, could be helped by guidance up steps on a ladder of well-being, and achieving rewards. Wimbledon House was the beginning of "group therapy on the side of the road."

His program focused on experiential sports like tennis, skiing, and cycling where kids learned about personal growth, self-discovery, overcoming challenges, and teamwork. As counselors we needed to be able to instruct, challenge, and set limits, while developing nurturing, therapeutic relationships, which remains the foundation of all Rite of Passage programs. We continue to develop our programs in an ever-evolving industry, while holding to this core model of growth and development in everything we do.

In this year's magazine we're honoring our history and celebrating the evolution of our agency as we continue providing unique opportunities for youth to thrive in programs that challenge and inspire them. Through speech and debate, leadership summits, recording studios, and more, we're giving kids a voice and empowering them to harness their creativity in unique and powerful ways. We're also excited to feature *Hard Miles*, a movie starring Matthew Modine, that follows the true story of the beginning of the Rite of Passage cycling program. It has been an absolute pleasure to work with Christian Sander, R.J. Daniel Hanna, and the entire team at Pensé Productions to get this movie completed and ready for theater release.

To all of Rite of Passage's loyal supporters, stakeholders, employees, and all the amazing youth we've had the opportunity to work with, thank you for your encouragement and support these past 40 years. Without all of you, we wouldn't be able to celebrate these great achievements, and more importantly, continue improving the lives of youth.

When we rode out of Placerville, I couldn't have imagined what the next decades would hold, but I'm truly grateful to continue on this ride of life with our youth, witnessing countless lives transformed.




Ski Broman
Chief Executive Officer



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FINDING ANOTHER GEAR

A strong-willed social worker at a residential youth program in Colorado assembles a cycling team of system-involved adolescents and takes them on a transformative 1000-mile ride. Inspired by the life of Greg Townsend and the Ridge View Academy Cycling Team, this is the story of how these young men found another gear.



In the spring of 2023, the screenwriting and directing team of *Hard Miles*, Christian Sander and R.J. Daniel Hanna, debuted their passion project at the Bentonville Film Festival in Arkansas, unaware of the impact and success it would have on the film festival circuit. Based on a true story, the film follows beleaguered coach Greg Townsend (Matthew Modine) as he rounds up an unlikely crew of challenging students for a seemingly impossible bike ride from Denver to the Grand Canyon.

The people behind the story of *Hard Miles* have been a part of Rite of Passage since the beginning. Greg Townsend came to the program in 1986 and has led many life-altering cross-country cycling tours. These ultra cycling tours are one of the foundational athletic challenges used by Rite of Passage programs to change lives, change gears.

As with most things in film making, the characters in *Hard Miles* have been altered and melded, scenes and storylines both exaggerated and played down, but the final product ultimately rings true to all who lived this story.

The screen play, written by Christian Sander and R.J. Daniel Hanna, takes ten years of different events and merges them into a cohesive story about a 762-mile bike ride that reveals to each member of the team what they're truly capable of as they work together to overcome adversity on the road.

Sander was inspired to create *Hard Miles* after reading a few magazine articles about Townsend and then touring the Ridge View cycling program. He pursued both Townsend and this passion project for two years before finally working with Greg.

Greg doesn't like being in the spotlight, which made him shy away from the project initially. He's known more for his instinctive ability to connect with kids, like the character in the movie named Smink who struggles with an eating disorder. "When you're able to build a foundation of relationship and the kids have buy in," says Townsend, "then the real work can begin."



Blue Fox Entertainment presents *Hard Miles*:





Greg Townsend (center) poses with his onscreen counterpart, Matthew Modine (left), and Modine's cycling stunt double, professional cyclist Cormac McGeough (right), affectionately dubbed "the three Gregs" on set.

He rides bikes with kids, and maintains friendships with the program graduates who inspired the movie's characters. He says, "It has always been about the relationships. We're not doing this from the sidelines—we're right there with the kids. That's what makes a difference."

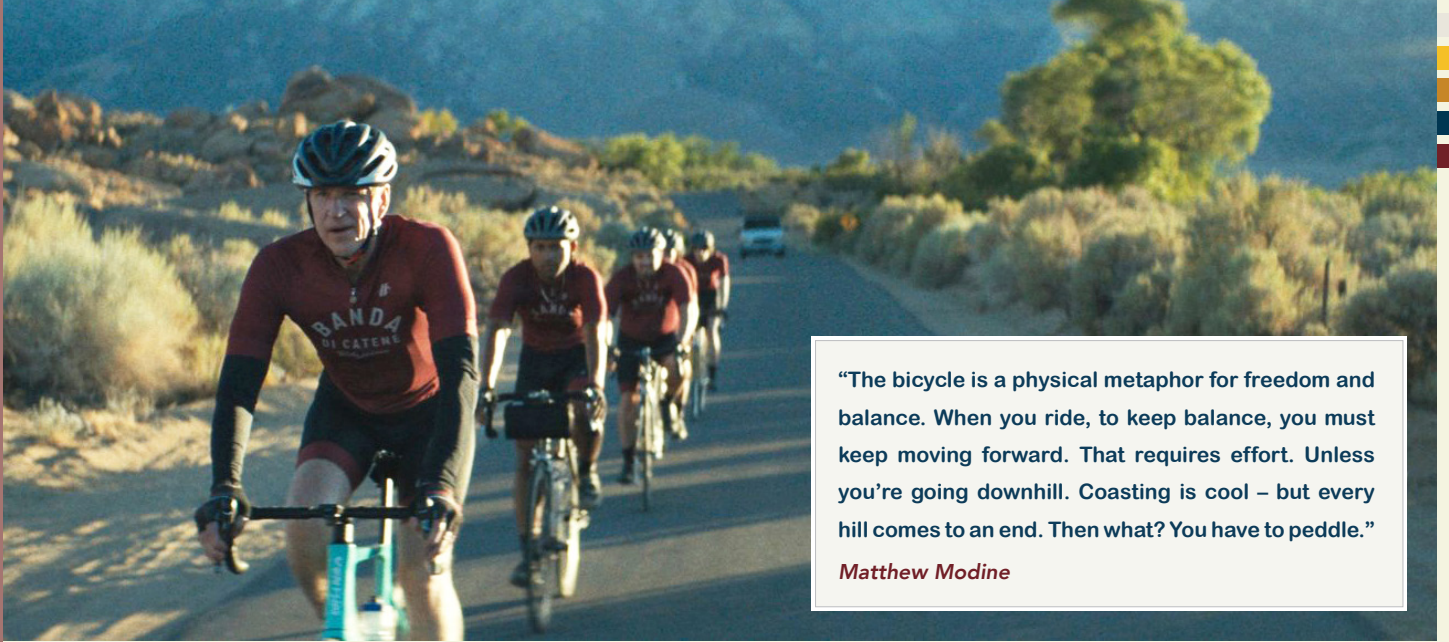
The *Hard Miles* team secured notable talent to play ROP staff, including Mathew Modine (*Full Metal Jacket*, *Oppenheimer*) as Greg Townsend and Sean Astin (*Goonies*, *Rudy*, *Lord of the Rings*) who worked with Modine last in *Stranger Things*. Astin plays a bike mechanic, who Townsend says is a composite of several bike shop owners who have supported Greg's cycling teams throughout the years, but mainly Joel Stein, a bike shop owner in Gardnerville, Nevada, who taught Greg how to rebuild bikes back in 1986 at the infancy of Rite of Passage.

Star Matthew Modine says it's always "tricky" playing a role based on a real person, although he benefited from the on-set presence of Greg himself, who became a technical advisor and part of the crew during filming.

Modine went on to say, "I enjoyed working with everyone involved with the film. I'm so happy that audiences are loving the film and the positive feelings they have for days and days after watching it. I remember seeing those movies that stick with you for years. Films that alter your perspective and help you to see what you'd never seen before. It's wonderful to be a part of a movie like this."



Townsend rides with ROP youth in 1989.



“The bicycle is a physical metaphor for freedom and balance. When you ride, to keep balance, you must keep moving forward. That requires effort. Unless you’re going downhill. Coasting is cool – but every hill comes to an end. Then what? You have to peddle.”

Matthew Modine

The real-life cycling team was a group from Ridge View Academy, a residential school in Denver operated by ROP for the Colorado Division of Youth Services. There, young men were given a second chance with a normalized high school experience instead of juvenile detention. Students at Ridge View could choose cycling among other athletics and could also learn bike mechanics, skills they could carry with them into the workforce and their future.

“ROP is about providing an exceptional life experience to help kids take a different path,” says Townsend. “If we can build a young person strong enough to deal with life, they will have a much brighter future.”

While making the movie, the actors got “the ROP experience” and found themselves in much better physical shape. They also discovered why cycling has been a part of this exceptional experience throughout the decades. Rite of Passage founders understood something that researchers have begun to explore more fully in the past ten years—the neurological benefits.

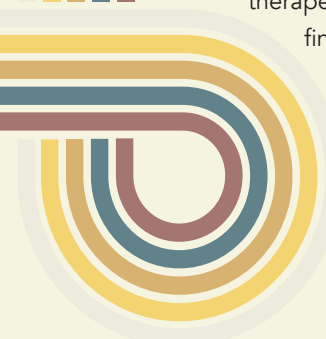
“There’s a lot of science behind cycling and the brain,” says Townsend. “What fires together wires together. It takes about one and a half hours of mobility, balance, and focus, and then you’re pedaling on the best therapist.”

Cycling also builds self-confidence and teaches teamwork. Riders learn to “draft,” or ride behind the wheel of a teammate for stretches of the ride to reduce wind resistance. They learn to leverage their personal strengths, as climbers or sprinters. They help each other with food, water, and mechanical failures.

“As the brain and personality change,” says Townsend, “it opens up possibilities. There will be community, family, and struggles along the way, but these changes help break the bonds to negative forces.”

Townsend recognizes that despite the science behind the therapeutic elements of cycling and the affinity many find in the saddle, youth need to find the sport or activity that helps them change course.

“Looking to the future, we need to continue creating other avenues, other experiences for kids who aren’t going to find their path on the bike. For some it will be something else that changes their course.” ■





CYCLING THROUGH THE YEARS

MAP STUDIES.
POLITICAL UNITED STATES.
 Note. For directions for drawing the map of the United States, see page 100.

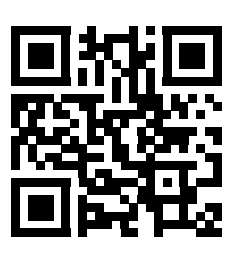
Atlantic. What gulf and river form parts of some...
 country forms the rest? What ocean on the east? On the west?
 What States border on the Atlantic? On the Gulf? The Pacific? The
 Great Lakes? What partly bounded by the Mississippi? Crossed by the
 Missouri? Partly bordered by the Ohio? The largest State? The smallest?
 Let the States and Territories of each group be named, with capitals.
 Which States are most favorably situated for commerce with Europe?

What natural...
 Valley possess?
 Where is Cape Cod? Sandy Hoo...
 Where is Washington? New...
 What great city on the Delaware...
 near the mouth of the Missour...
 What city near the mouth of the...
 are the two great Gulf ports? Wh...
 Where is Savannah? Norfolk? Po...

TOUR DE YOUTH

In recognition of Rite of Passage's 40th anniversary, our agency is thrilled to host a special event: the Tour de Youth, a cross-country bike ride celebrating our agency's four decades of providing unique opportunities for experiential learning and adventures that connect youth to the natural world and help them thrive.

Led by Greg Townsend, the Tour de Youth aims to guide students on a transformative journey of mental and physical development. Through hard work, dedication, mental resilience, and perseverance, participants will embark on a once-in-a-lifetime adventure spanning over 3,000 miles, joining fellow kids, staff, and alumni from Rite of Passage programs across the country.



Follow along as we embark on an epic journey filled with camaraderie, personal growth, and positive impact:

BUILDING SCHOOLHOUSES NOT J



Franklin Jerald "Jerry" Adamek began his career working with at-risk youth as a high school teacher, coach, and counselor in 1966. He then transitioned to the Colorado Division of Youth Services, a career that spanned 31 years. He served as the first Regional Administrator in Southern Colorado, was the Director of the Mountain View Youth Services Center, and was a supervisor with the 18th Judicial District Probation Department. He was appointed by Barbara McDonnell, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Human Services in September 1991. During his seven-year tenure as Director, Adamek spearheaded the concept of gender-specific programs in Colorado and oversaw the construction of four state-of-the-art youth corrections facilities.

I first saw the power of education opportunities and enrichment programs for youth when I worked with youth at a residential summer program called Upward Bound, which was part of President Johnson's War on Poverty and the *Education Opportunity Act*. For eight weeks, kids from low-income families participated in a rigorous academic program on the Colorado Women's College campus. Seeing kids thrive through education and learning new skills through the activities in the program showed me what youth services could and should be.

Shortly after, the Supreme Court decision, *In re Gault*, 387 U.S. 1 (1967), radically changed the juvenile court system, reforming the original model of the juvenile courts and creating the courts that we see across the country today. Before this, juvenile courts worked under the "court knows best" paradigm. After *Gault*, for the first time there were public defenders representing youth in juvenile court. Kids had their own rights under the law because they had legal counsel looking after them.

Then national legislation of the late 60s and early 70s funded programs that emphasized

prevention and treatment, which launched the evolution toward the youth programs we have today. Both the *Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act* and the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act* paved the way for providing alternatives for youth who need services and educational opportunities to have the best chance for success.

In the 1970s and 80s, adventure-based therapy and wilderness experiential programs were introduced as a treatment option for youth with behavioral disorders, substance abuse, and mental health issues. These pro-



TAILHOUSES: F. JERRY ADAMEK

grams focused on risk factors of delinquency, including external locus of control, low self-esteem, and poor interpersonal skills. At the same time Restorative Justice models came to the forefront and introduced an emphasis on repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior.

The following decades brought further changes to the youth services industry during the Get Tough Era of the 1980s and 1990s. In reaction to increases in crime, the Reagan Administration introduced private sector involvement, which expanded rapidly. We saw standards raised. Kids were safer, healthier, supported and treated as kids with equal rights under the law.

These agencies brought experiential learning and opportunities for Positive Youth Development (PYD) which emerged in the 1990s as a response to the deficit model and the "tough on crime" era. This holistic model focused on developing youth strengths, while increasing protective factors, prosocial support, and positive role models. At the same time, the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model emerged. This evidence-based ap-

proach to intervention assesses criminogenic risks and needs to drive individual program design and service plans. Agencies use the "responsivity principle" to match the style and method of treatment to the youth's abilities and learning style.

In the 2000s, researchers began to explore the prevalence of PTSD in youth involved in the juvenile justice system, the link between trauma and behavior, and the need for trauma-informed services to improve outcomes. All of this paved the way for the Academy Model that we used at Ridge View, the state-of-the-art program we designed in Colorado. We had to ask ourselves, 'Do we want to build a prison or a school?' To develop our vision for Ridge View Academy we said, 'Let's take the money for locks and fences, and buy computers and white boards.' We opened Ridge View in 2001. I was retired, but still oversaw the construction. People believed in it because they didn't want to build a prison. Working with ROP to fulfill this vision was the highlight of my career.

Today the youth services industry continues to incorporate these models of progress

into best practices. Ideally, kids should get the services and support they need before they're in the system. School is the most immediate opportunity for kids to succeed, especially when combined with mental health services in a normalized setting. There they learn to contribute to society in a variety of ways, becoming good citizens, raising families. This is success. ■



EMPOWERING VOICES

Lava Heights Academy

At Lava Heights Academy, a specialized treatment program in Utah, speech and debate helps students discover and develop academic strengths that are shown by research to increase test scores as well as the likelihood of graduating from high school and college. The Lava debaters are also taking home trophies at regional competitions and qualifying for state, despite starting their season as beginners, or "novices."

"Our goal, unlike most debate squads," says debate coach Mary Thayer, "is to improve the skills of each student from where they are now. We celebrate all improvements. We are not trying to get 'the best' speakers in the school to join the debate team, so we can 'Take State!' Rather, we accept all at the point they are and work to grow from there, giving voice and confidence to each student."

Also called "forensics," speech and debate teaches students vital skills, like critical thinking, persuasive speaking, and efficient researching. Those who compete know it's like other sports—teams train in a variety of events, such as Congress, Lincoln Douglas, and Public Policy. This training includes sparring over foreign and domestic policy issues and memorizing speeches.

Debate teaches and tests the ability to understand two sides of an issue and hold them in the mind at the same time. To do this, they must research and support all opinions with evidence. Recently, Lava Heights' novice debater "L" wrote 16 speeches to prepare for regionals and ultimately placed 7th in the competition.

Debating also boosts confidence, something Lava Heights debaters confirm.

"At first it's nerve wracking," she says, "but afterwards you think, wow I just did that."

Her teammate "K" has written two bills for the mock Congress event. Both will be debated statewide at all classification levels, one of which is a Holistic Medicine bill, which earned her the 4th place position. She says that her most memorable moment during debate this year was when she left her opponent unable to question her further. "He was speechless."

Lava Heights hosts four intramural competitions per year, with off-campus tournaments to support transition as students prepare to return to a mainstream high school. Both girls plan to continue with their newfound passion. K plans to continue debate at a different high school when she goes home soon. L, who is soon to be adopted, has asked for a school with a speech and debate program as one of her adoption requirements.

This is more than coach Mary Thayer could ask for. "When students leave our school, we encourage them to participate in any extracurricular activities, not just debate, to keep experiencing positive peer interactions, to continue growing."

Whether debaters continue competing or not, the skills and confidence gained in competition have the potential to change trajectories and create brighter futures. ■



CREATING HOPE IN THE STUDIO Western Secure Treatment Unit

At Western Secure Treatment Unit in Pennsylvania, youth are learning the value of therapeutic creative expression at a newly installed music recording studio. In partnership with Creative Hope Studios, a Lancaster based organization, youth at Western can go to the studio and work with staff to learn music production, mixing, song writing, and performance skills.

“It really is all-inclusive instruction,” says Program Director James Town, “not just playing with the equipment.”

Town met Creative Hope founder TJ Griffin years ago, while Griffin did advocacy work at another program and where the pilot for the studio program began. After seeing it in action Town says, “We felt the program was so beneficial for the kids, we decided to use an entire classroom for it.”

Staff have begun training, and eventually clinicians will also be working with youth at the studio as part of the training package. Once students have completed their initial program curriculum they can earn time in the studio.

“The studio allowed me to decompress and helped me clear my mind of stress while learning appropriate ways to cope with day-to-day issues,” says student Hanif G. “Being able to express creativity while learning new skills was valuable. I have an interest in the music industry and being able to use the studio allowed me to explore music production, engineering, mixing, and performing.”

He says the studio also helped him build healthy relationships with staff at Western. “It showed me that team members care, and they are here to support me in becoming healthy.” ■

LEADING LOUDER

The Embracing Project

When young people have been exploited, especially at the critical stage of adolescence in human development, giving them agency in their lives can help create a path from victim to survivor. Teaching leadership skills is an important way to give young survivors a sense of control over their lives, which then builds their capacity to handle other challenges and responsibilities. Survivor leaders have the unique ability to contribute to work aimed at ending human trafficking with advocacy, mentorship, outreach, and community education.

In September of 2023, The Embracing Project (TEP) in Las Vegas, Nevada organized the first Leading Louder Youth Conference for sexually exploited youth. This two-day leadership conference was designed to provide opportunities for youth to build community with fellow survivors and grow in leadership, self-advocacy, and self-confidence. Youth participated in a variety of different leadership activities, including defining leadership and leadership styles, engaging in discussion about leadership, and mindfulness activities.

The highlight of the conference was the Resilient Teen Panel, made up of past TEP clients who had survived sexual exploitation and victimization. The panelists discussed how they survived their traumatic experiences, their journeys toward healing, and detailed where they are now. Their encouragement and support made youth attending the conference comfortable enough to talk about their current challenges.

“The panel and conference were very moving and emotional for the youth,” says Program Director Makaya Swain, “but also the community at TEP was able to rally around each other to ensure each youth felt supported and heard.”

The conference was so successful that it has received a grant from the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services to be replicated and become a semi-annual event. ■





Mentors and Memory Makers

The Grandparents of San Pasqual Academy

San Pasqual Academy, a Rite of Passage program funded by San Diego County, is home to foster youth who benefit from an on-campus intergenerational mentoring program that has been active since the inception of this one-of-a-kind campus in the heart of Escondido, California.

The mentors, who are known as the “Grandparents,” live on campus where they interact with the youth throughout the day and host nightly activities, from yoga and meditation on Mellow Mondays, to game nights, movies and baking nights, and even Groove in the Grove where they listen to reggae music in hammocks hung in the nearby orange groves. The SPA Grandparents make sure that these foster youth experience lives filled with positive memories and loving support.

This type of mentoring is a research-backed method of supporting the positive development of youth through a reciprocal exchange. While youth show increased self-esteem, academic achievement, and improved social emotional skills, their older mentors experience improved health, cognitive function, improved well-being, and reduced isolation. Each generation also gains a better understanding and positive view of the other.

Grandma Wendy Melendrez Munoz says she got involved while working as a firefighter at the station on campus. As a San Diego County firefighter, she would work shifts at San Pasqual occasionally, then ended up staying at the station where she was able to mentor the kids before she was an official Grandparent.

“There are pockets of kids that you really connect with,” says Wendy. “I have really enjoyed those relationships and am still connected to many of these kids. We hang out and go to the beach and they still call me Grandma.”

Grandpa Lauren has been involved since the beginning. Always very involved with the kids, He’s now 81 and says that mentoring the kids has given him a purpose. Throughout these 20 years he has always been very involved with recreation therapy on campus and was even the head coach of the softball team. He continues to recruit new Grandparents from the many caring adults in his life, including Wendy.

Twenty years ago, the Grandparents would bake the kids cookies and go to their games, just like real grandparents. “Now getting the kids out of the house is the biggest challenge,” says Wendy.

To make sure the kids have well rounded lives and experiences, the Grandparents also go to museums, do beach cleanup and work with blind surfers, as well as hiking club that coordinates with a group called Foster the Earth, which is a hiking and backpacking group specifically for foster kids.

For these memory makers and the kids they mentor, intentional experiences are the beginning of a positive ripple effect. The increased self-confidence and sense of purpose and belonging that mentoring imparts, leads to healthier lifestyle choices, increased academic success and higher career goals, which (results in) transformed lives. ■



The Mind Body Connection

*Jennifer Siozos, LPC
National Director of Intergrated Care, Rite of Passage*

Mind-body approaches to improving mental health conditions is something that has been studied by researchers for decades and has been used for centuries. Now more than ever, as childhood has essentially moved indoors, leaving kids disconnected from the natural world, outdoor activities, such as cycling, not only hold physical health benefits, but the emotional benefits of connecting to the nature that surrounds them. Cycling, and other forms of outdoor recreational support helps our youth engage all five senses. When all five senses are engaged, the brain has increased capacity to learn, see more options, and think more clearly, which leads to overall higher functioning. In a sense, it is bringing homeostasis back in balance in the body which leads to better whole health wellness.

Rite of Passage recognizes that engaging youth in sports, outdoor play, nature and team focused activities not only builds character, confidence, and leadership, but plays a vital role in long term healthy habits and patterns that our youth need to recover from traumatic pasts and write their narrative for the future. Recreational sports such as cycling and skiing, which can support long distances, enhance physical endurance which has a direct correlation to reducing levels of stress, especially toxic stress, which can lead to more serious mental health diagnoses such as depression and anxiety. Helping our youth find their "medicine" in nature and regular body movement releases endorphins and regulates dopamine in the body to create natural defenses against mental health issues and tendencies to abuse substances as a way to feel "normal and functioning."

The best part of integrating mind-body approaches into the overall care of youth, is that it not only benefits the youth, but also the staff members working with them by creating new experiences that are relationship-based with team-based successes and failures. It encourages lessons learned through play, cooperation and shared knowledge to complete activities. It helps our staff relate to and learn about the youth in different ways, not always possible through traditional methods of skill-based counseling.

Experiential approaches also directly relate to the neuroplasticity in youth brains. More positive experiences and relationships allow the brain to form new neural pathways and a fresh view of what is possible. By creating safe and positive experiences in a youth's life we fulfill our mission of *improving the lives of youth* and create a ripple effect of healing into our communities at large for all youth and families. ■



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