

Published June 20th, 2012

## Wilderness Therapy Students Reflect Back on Their Story

By Sophie Braccini



Getting back to nature is a part of therapy Photo provided

disorders to Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). It cuts them off from their normal life without any electronics and immerses them in nature, in groups with peers and constant supervision. "This is not a boot camp," says Dr. Jade Wimberley, a local naturopathic physician who's a friend of founder Aaron Fernandes and has been working at Open Sky since 2006. "This is a place for assessment, treatment planning, and to start healing." The food is organic, the staff is experienced and all of them are trained psychologists. The camp has a psychiatrist on site all the time.

"The schedule was very rigorous, it was not easy," remembers James, "but I met absolutely amazing people that took us on the journey." James characterizes Open Sky as a soul-searching experience. "I went in not knowing a lot about myself, shielding a lot of my feelings with drugs and alcohol," he says. "I got help finding out who I was, and how to improve my life."

"Put into nature, they have to do everything for themselves," says Victoria, mother of Ashley, another Lamorinda-raised kid who went to Open Sky a few years ago. "They are surrounded 24/7 by highly qualified therapists, including an on-site psychiatrist, who deals with emotional issues on the spot." She adds that the difference is that as they are in nature, with no other resource than themselves, confronted with the natural consequences of their actions.

"They are unplugged from society, and stripped of everything including their clothes (everyone wears the same clothing)," adds James' mother Linda. "After a few weeks, they become part of nature and let go, and start to understand themselves."

The experience at Open Sky was very dramatic for Ashley. In her early years, she was a passionate ballerina until a severe hip injury ended her dreams. Her parents reacted to signs of depression and she started seeing a long list of therapists and doctors. "She was diagnosed with ADD, later with bipolar disorder and was heavily medicated," says her mother, "but nothing really worked."

After failing college, Ashley herself sought Open Sky because a Miramonte friend's brother had greatly benefited from going there. "At Open Sky, people finally saw me for who I was," says Ashley. "Until then everyone thought that something went wrong with me. What I needed was to process things that happened to me as a child and that were missed because I was resilient and had a lot of friends." Ashley thinks that the pursuit of perfection and the need to maintain a positive image drove her to question her self worth.

"I learned so much there," adds Ashley. "This is a very magical place, with such amazing energy, it is so affirming. The staff has a level of authenticity that is rare; they really relate to the young people."

For many, Open Sky is just the beginning of the road to recovery. Ashley went to other facilities while partly back in school and is now finishing her bachelor's degree. "I am graduating this year, I'm dancing again. I've started my life over as a different person," says Ashley.

James also went to a different facility after Open Sky, where he started taking classes and then went back to college. He graduated this year in anthropology. "Before I went to Open Sky, I wanted to do everything on my own," he reflects. "I learned about accepting help from other people, and reaching out. My relationships with others in my age group increased tremendously; I learned to communicate."

James' mother adds that the impact of the program has been huge on the whole family. "As parents we had to go to therapy every week and talk to his therapist every week," she remembers. "It was very interactive."

James set up the tarp that would protect him during the night and started making a fire for his dinner. He was alone, completely alone in the middle of the woods, and that solitude was to last three days. He had nothing to do but read, write, wander around and think. This was not punishment, in fact, when James talks about his experience at Open Sky, the wilderness therapy program for teens and young adults, he says 'the solo' was the best part of the 10 weeks he spent there. "This was a time of self-discovery and reflection," remembers the young man. "It was a life-changing experience."

James was a star athlete at Campolindo High School and a student with excellent grades. He had also started to experiment with alcohol and recreational drugs when he was about 14 years old. The problem got worse when he went to college. After dropped classes and very difficult times with his family, James was hospitalized at John Muir Medical Center in a 30-day rehabilitation program before his parents suggested he go to Open Sky, a 12-week wilderness therapy program.

Open Sky admits students ages 13 to 28 with everything from depression to substance abuse to eating

James says he gained awareness about his addiction. "We don't ever get rid of it, it will always be with me," he says, "but I am able to pinpoint warning signs and pull myself out of the situation." Ashley has found a new sense to her life. "I feel a sense of duty, I'm driven by something bigger than myself and I want to go into medicine. I found my light and I want others to find it," she says.

Open Sky is expensive and is not covered by insurance. The cost is approximately \$485 per day, which translates to about \$27,000 to \$34,000 for the eight- to 10-week program. Some scholarships are available. "We're fortunate that we could afford it," concludes Victoria. "It is your child and you would do everything [for them]."

For more information about Open Sky, contact Dr. Jade Wimberley at [jade@openskywilderness.com](mailto:jade@openskywilderness.com)

The names of the youths and their parents were changed to protect their privacy. The parents currently live in Lamorinda. They shared their stories to help other struggling teens and families.

Reach the reporter at: [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

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