

Mentors make it happen in Big Sky **Thanks to trio of volunteers, local kids now eligible for BYEP**

By JOLENE KELLER Lone Peak Lookout
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Thanks to volunteers from Big Sky, for the first time this year, Ophir School and Lone Peak High students have the chance to participate in the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Program. BYEP has been hooking up adult mentors with youths aged 13 to 17 in the Bozeman and Belgrade area since 2001.



"We give kids in our community the opportunity to do what everybody else lives here to do" said Pete MacFadyen, executive director and founder of BYEP.

Big Sky kids were previously not eligible since there had not been any mentors in Big Sky to work directly with them.

That all changed this year when Madeline Mussman, volunteer ski patroller at Big Sky resort, Travis Toelkes, a ski instructor at Big Sky Resort, and Stephanie DeBiasio, a full time ski patroller at the resort, volunteered to be mentors to Big Sky youths.

"The people who are volunteering their time as mentors are some of the most fantastic people I know in Big Sky," said Hatton Littman, film and video teacher at Ophir and Lone Peak High. "They love the outdoors, they have an infectious joy for living life to its fullest and they are just really fun people to hang out with. One of the key components of the BYEP program is helping kids make positive choices in their lives by building their self-esteem. I think that these mentors are fantastic models of how to live happy, healthy, well-rounded lives and I can't wait for our students to get to spend time with them."

At Ophir Dave Granger, program director at BYEP, worked with principal Dr. Anne Marie Mistretta and Littman to select the best-suited kids for the 12-week, free-of-charge scholarship program. The group worked together for over a year to get the program running in Big Sky.

Twelve Big Sky students were selected as potential candidates, and six were chosen to participate. Selection is based on various risk factors, such as self-esteem, home issues, and personal interests, among others.

"The guys at BYEP have filled such an essential niche in supporting teenagers in the Gallatin Valley," said Littman. "Often times the common stereotype is that kids in Big Sky are all well off, college bound, and free of teenage struggles. Those of us who live and work here know that Big Sky families share the same stresses that people everywhere are going through. We have kids who get into trouble at school, at home

and with law enforcement. We have kids who experiment with drugs and sex as they come into themselves as young adults. We are so thankful for this effective program that supports kids and shows them the power of making better choices in their lives. As teachers we know how much one hand up can change a student."



Starting January 11 the six Big Sky students will meet weekly with the three mentors at Ophir School for two-hour workshops based on social and emotional topics such as trust and teamwork, conflict resolution, and identity and consumerism. Then, once a week the group hits the slopes at Big Sky Resort- equipped with all new gear, which is donated to the program. Big Sky Resort provides free lift tickets as well.

"We do three months of snowboarding and skiing," said Granger. "Roughly 90 percent of our 54 youth participants throughout the area choose to snowboard. Each youth in our program receives a scholarship which covers the life skills workshops, lift tickets, brand new gear which the kids get to keep after they graduate in April, and less glamorous items like PB&J's for sustenance on the hill."

Ski and snowboard gear, as many of us are all too well aware, does not come cheap. Since the program is of no cost to the kids, it's clear that funding must come from somewhere.

"Big Sky Resort has been our largest supporter since day one," said MacFadyen. "Their generosity continues to grow annually as a testament to their care for youth in our communities in Big Sky, Belgrade, and Bozeman. This year the resort will donate approximately \$80,000 in lift tickets to our program. That's over \$300,000 since the beginning of their support in 2002."

The cost per youth, which includes the gear they get to keep and lift tickets, is approximately \$4,000. That puts the BYEP annual budget at just over \$400,000. In kind donations, like lift tickets and gear donations, cover about \$150,000, which leaves \$250,000 to be raised. This money comes from a variety of sources, most of which are local.

"I think that the local philanthropists in Big Sky are also really pleased to see a program running for our kids. We have many large donors to BYEP who live and work in Big Sky and they very much wanted to see service for our kids locally in addition to the kids in Belgrade and Bozeman," said Littman.



Big Sky Youth Empowerment
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Getting Outside, Growing Inside