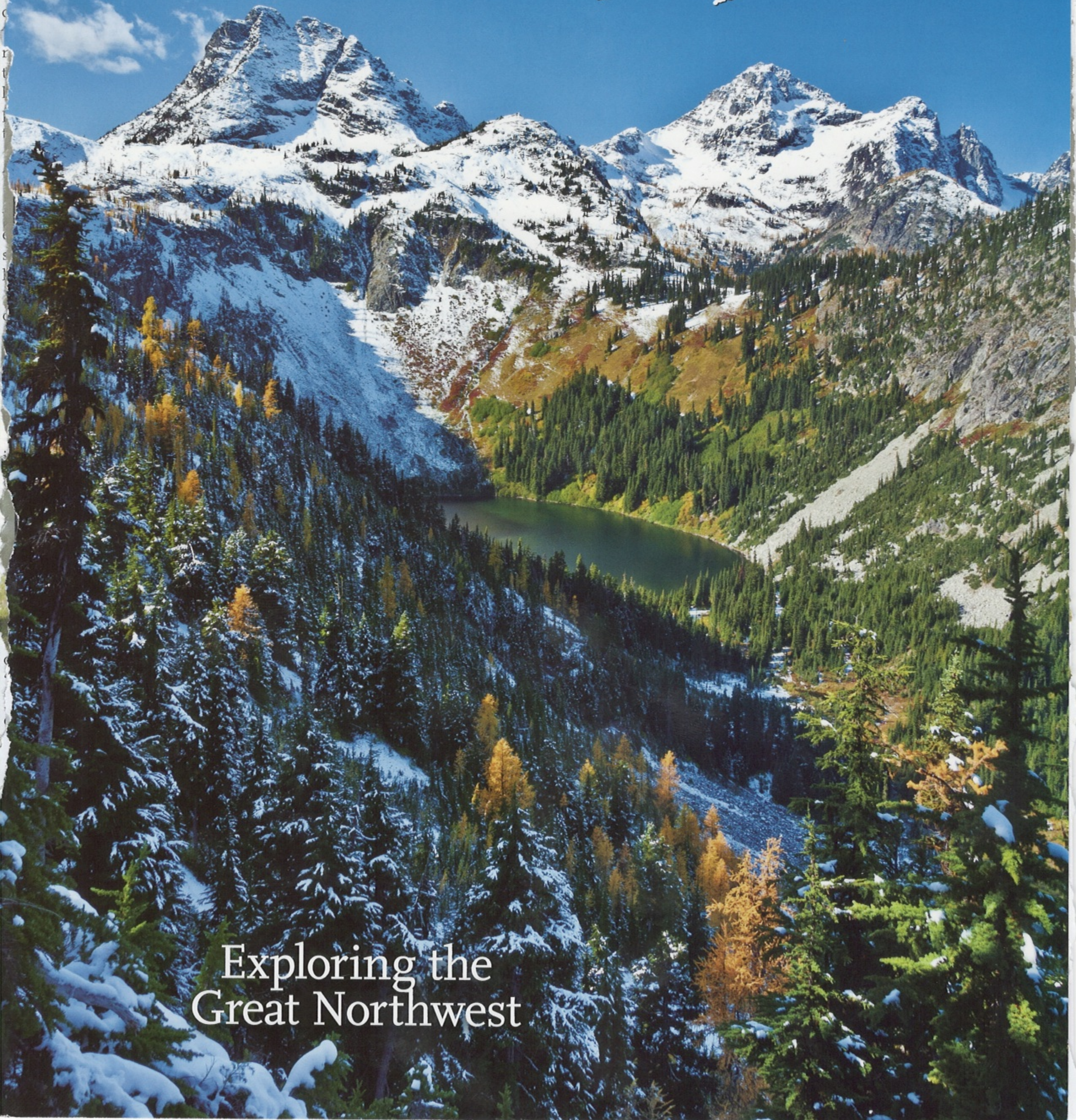


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## Horizon EDITION



Exploring the  
Great Northwest



# Mentors Make a Difference



Young people benefit from relationships with caring adults | By Scott Driscoll

A DOZEN GIRLS, ranging in age from 7 to 12, gather at the Jefferson Park Golf Course putting green in a south Seattle neighborhood, eager to receive instruction from Heidi Wills, executive director of The First Tee of Greater Seattle. ■ “What is today’s core value?” asks Wills, who is also the girls’ coach. ■ “Integrity,” comes the unanimous reply. The girls learned about the day’s core value at a warm-up session near the municipal course’s clubhouse, where Wills also explained the day’s “healthy habit”—safety—which includes playing by the rules, standing an appropriate distance from someone swinging a club and waiting one’s turn.



She next asks the girls to define integrity. After some mumbling, a participant offers: "Do the right thing even when no one's watching?"

Wills smiles broadly and points to their score-cards. "No one but you will be counting your strokes. This is your opportunity to practice integrity."

The First Tee, a nonprofit founded in 1997 in Florida and now comprising 188 chapters in the United States and four international locations, mentors youngsters by pairing golf with life-success principles that kids can put to use on the course. The First Tee of Greater Seattle became the nonprofit's 106th chapter in 2002 and now serves more than 1,000 children a year at four central-Puget Sound-area municipal golf courses: Jefferson Park, Jackson Park, Crossroads and Riverbend.

Wills—who began playing golf at age 13 and whose career included serving as a political aide to the King County executive and then serving as an elected member of the Seattle City Council before she became director of The First Tee of Greater Seattle in 2004—offers the girls advice on proper stance and hand grip.

After listening to her mentor's recommendations about correcting for slope, Abigail, a seventh-grader, sinks her next putt. "This is peaceful," says the teen. "That's why I like it."

For the last 10 minutes of the 90-minute class, the participants huddle with Wills for debriefing, a chance for the mentor to ask questions that reinforce key values. "Anyone get a hole in one while putting?" she asks. One hand shoots up.

"How did you do it?" Wills inquires.

The girl says proudly, "By aiming toward the target." The life lesson sinks in: You are more likely to

get what you want when you aim for the target.

The First Tee is one of approximately 5,000 mentoring programs in the United States striving to make a difference in the lives of potentially at-risk youngsters, says David Shapiro, chief executive officer of Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership, based in Alexandria, Virginia. The nonprofit organization—which was co-founded in 1990 by businessmen and philanthropists Geoffrey T. Boisi and Raymond G. Chambers—seeks to promote, advocate and be a resource for youth mentoring.

"We say there are 9 million kids in the United States who need mentoring," Shapiro notes. This figure includes young people ages 8 to 18 from single-parent households that fall below the poverty line. While about 3 million of these children benefit from mentoring each year, that leaves about 6 million who may not have the advantage of an additional support system of adults who have been trained to help and who can be counted on to be consistent positive influences, he says.

"Growing up in economic stress can mean there is more transience, more homelessness, fewer opportunities to form consistent relationships," Shapiro says. This kind of stress is a strong predictor of which kids will not do well in school and are looking at a possible future of welfare dependency or incarceration, he says. "If these same kids can be anchored by a caring adult who keeps showing up, that can make a positive difference."

A report titled "Mentoring: A Promising Strategy for Youth Development," published by the nonprofit Child Trends research center in February 2002, indicated that children who receive mentoring have better school attendance, are less likely to engage in

Above: The First Tee mentors youngsters by pairing golf with life-success principles that can be practiced on the course.

Right: Volunteers with Start Making a Reader Today (SMART) foster enthusiasm for reading, helping students to stay on track academically.





substance abuse, and have more-positive social attitudes and relationships.

Many nonprofit mentoring programs in the Northwest are contributing to these kinds of positive outcomes. In addition to The First Tee of Greater Seattle, these programs include Youth Empowered to Succeed in Boise, Idaho; Big Sky Youth Empowerment in Bozeman, Montana; and Start Making A Reader Today, serving all of Oregon.

## The First Tee

Evan Johnsen, program director of The First Tee of Greater Seattle—whose board members include Wendy Jones, Alaska Air Group's chief risk, compliance & ethics officer—explains that slicing drives into the rough or having to make several chip shots to get near the cup are times when discouragement can be turned into an opportunity to learn to persevere, to keep a positive attitude, and to gain the confidence that with guidance from a trusted adult, the kids can improve, and achieve their goals.

"Golf is a challenging game," Johnsen says. "If it were easy, it wouldn't lend itself to such important life lessons. For some children, the classes on the course can be their second home, a place where safe adults are present. Learning to play golf can be a metaphor for learning a better way to play the game of life."

For example, he says, "when a preteen I'll call Silas, who was big for his age and seemed to lack some coordination and muscle skills, began participating in The First Tee a few years ago, his eyes would well up with tears if things didn't go his way, and he'd remove himself from the activity and isolate himself from the group."

Johnsen learned that Silas had tried many activities before golf, and because he'd apparently get upset if something was difficult at first, he'd evidently walked away from every one of them—and even his schoolwork—feeling like a failure.

"But at The First Tee," Johnson says, "he could learn and play the game of golf without a sense of failure versus success, without worrying



about winning versus losing, or being cut from the team."

First Tee coaches recognized Silas' talents, skills and efforts, Johnsen says. "They were there to support him when he felt challenged or wanted to give up, and they credited him for his perseverance. Three years later, he continues to attend our weekly classes, as well as clinics, field trips and family events. The ability to stick with something, and the confidence and feelings of self-worth that he's found golfing with The First Tee, will no doubt translate into other successes in his life, and in the meantime, he's becoming a fine golfer."

The First Tee of Greater Seattle offers 175 classes annually, providing clubs, balls and other equipment for kids who can't bring their own. The organization relies on 194 volunteers each year and also funds, at a discounted rate from the four participating golf courses, practice rounds for enrollees between The First Tee's classes.

The Greater Seattle Chapter participated in The First Tee's 2004 impact study by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas that reported that after six weeks of having a child in the program, 74 percent of parents observed improvements in their child's communication skills. A similar number observed that their child behaved more responsibly; 76 noted an increase in their child's confidence; and 52 percent reported improvement in their child's grades/attitude toward school.

First Tee participants are grouped by skill/experience/maturity level—with categories of PLAYer, par, birdie, eagle and ace—and must pass a proficiency test to move up. The fledgling golfers are encouraged not to compete against each other, but rather to compete

Above: Youth Empowered to Succeed volunteer John Ross is a friend and positive role model for Jadon.

Below: Big Sky Youth Empowerment builds teens' self-esteem via outdoor activities.





against what the organization calls “personal par,” the number of strokes it takes the youngster to achieve a goal such as getting the ball in the cup on a given hole.

“If they can get to where they need to be in one under their personal par, they’re happy with their progress and very well should be,” says Randy Burgeson, a First Tee coach and the facilities coordinator at Jefferson Park Golf Course.

“I try to find that coachable moment,” Burgeson says. “If I see a student not having fun, I promote ‘PPA.’ I ask them to be patient, to stay positive and to ask for help. A lot of lightbulbs go on with PPA.”

He coached a 9-year-old girl who said she was desperate to advance to the birdie level. To move up, she had to pass the test: from three separate locations near the green, she had to chip and putt a ball into the cup in no more than 12 total strokes.

“She used five strokes on her first ball,” Burgeson says. “On the second ball, her long putting was not good, and she used six strokes to get in. She was crying while she waited in line for her third station. She said, ‘I can’t do it; I won’t make it; I’ve only got one shot left.’

“I told her to look at it positively. ‘You still have one shot.’ From 15 yards off the

green, she chipped the ball on, and it rolled into the cup. She exploded with tears of happiness. The confidence that success built for her was unbelievable.”

### Youth Empowered to Succeed

Jadon’s father died when Jadon was 14, and his mom was unable to care for him, he says. After his father’s death, he lived in a series of shelters, group homes and foster-care situations. Until Jadon, now 17, had the good fortune of being adopted on his 16th birthday, the only consistent positive adult role model in his life was the mentor he got to know through the Youth Empowered to Succeed (YES) program created by national-award-winning Special Needs Adoption and Permanency Services Inc. (SNAPS), founded in Boise in 2001.

Youths in foster care provide some of the most poignant examples of the need for mentoring, says Shapiro of Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership. “Kids in foster care are too often told, ‘Collect your stuff; you’re moving tomorrow.’ It never goes away, this sense that someone gave you up. If you have this one person who will come see you even as you move from home to home, it gives you a feeling of connectivity and permanency.”

Jadon’s adoptive parents, a male couple—one a computer programmer, the other a nurse—are experienced foster parents able to provide good support, but Jadon also continues to see his mentor, and to participate in once-a-month YES group meetings. “They’re like a second family for me,” he says.

“A child once told me that being a kid waiting for a family is like being on the island of misfit toys,” says Marti Wiser, SNAPS’ founder and executive director. “Our mission is to see to it that every kid is nurtured in a committed family, either through adoption or a return to the birth family. But we also realized that the harder-to-place kids in the 11-to-18 age group need a mentor in their life, a friend and listening ear, while they wait for permanency.”

In 2008, Wiser created SNAPS’ YES program to fill that need. The program is run by volunteer Holly Graham and covers two south Idaho counties. YES has served 47 kids since its inception, with 30 children helped in the past two years since Graham took over. The typical youngster in need of mentoring is a 14- to 17-year-old referred by a caseworker from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Children and Family Services. Mentors are

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expected to meet with their mentees once a month for group activities and to provide one-on-one attention in between.

Mentors attend quarterly training to help them deal with issues that might arise. For instance, the child "might see the mentor as an end run around the foster parent or a way to get to McDonald's," Graham says. "They might try to talk the mentor into saying they should be allowed to have, say, a cellphone, then twist the arm of the foster parent to give them what they claim the mentor said they should have." Mentors are trained to say no to such requests but to keep things positive by encouraging participation in YES activities and by staying in touch regularly by phone or email.

John Ross, Jadon's mentor for the past three years and also a volunteer with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program for 27 years before that, believes the biggest benefit a mentor offers a child is being a consistent friend over time, a friend the child knows won't go away.

Ross—who is married, with a 21-year-old son of his own, and is a nurse at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise—describes Jadon as a teen with low-hanging baggy pants but also very respectful. "He's a very caring and responsible kid, quick to help out when needed."

The group meetings they attend usually involve outings for pizza or a movie, or maybe a trip to the park to throw a Frisbee. "These kids are really just typical teens," Ross says. "They like to hang out and talk. They're all over the place with hormones; there can be a little friction; but mostly they're just having fun. They like to joke around with their mentors. At Christmas they exchange gag gifts."

Ross also meets regularly with Jadon one-on-one, or sometimes they just text. "In foster care, before he was adopted, Jadon didn't have anyone consistent he could contact," Ross says. "He needed a loyal friend. I'm that. He knows I won't be judgmental."

Jadon says Ross has helped him adjust to his new adoptive family. "I went to him for advice. He said, 'Just keep your head up; keep your feet strong; and don't get in fights.'"

Jadon is now attending a technical school in Boise to learn autobody-collision repair. When he's finished with that and his GED (high school-graduation-equivalency) exam, both of which he expects to complete in January 2014, he plans to enroll at a technical college in Sacramento, California, to become certified to work on Mazdas, BMWs and Hondas. "I've had this goal since I was a kid," he says. "It's my passion. I love it."

Ross sees a bright future for his young friend. "He's goal-driven, and he knows how to get there. He just needs encouragement to stay on task."

Graham wishes more adults would set aside their possible misgivings about foster children's extra challenges, and become mentors. "It's important for us to remember: These kids didn't do anything wrong. Their parents failed to keep them safe."

### Big Sky Youth Empowerment

Big Sky Youth Empowerment (BYEP) in Bozeman takes at-risk eighth- to 12th-graders outside for adventures. BYEP founder Pete

MacFadyen, a licensed clinical professional counselor, believes that combining mentoring with snowboarding and whitewater rafting is more effective for troubled teens than the more conventional counseling model.

The idea for BYEP, founded in 2001, grew out of MacFadyen's involvement with an East Coast wilderness-therapy program during his college undergraduate days. Troubled teens were given a choice by the court: six months in detention or 30 days in the wilderness. "Mastering a skill like snowboarding can offer a teen a sense of self-esteem when they're mentored by an adult who is not that much older than

them, so it's someone they can relate to, not someone who feels like an authority figure," MacFadyen says.

BYEP uses a three-trimester approach: 12 weeks in autumn, 14 weeks in winter and 10 weeks in summer. For the winter 2013 trimester, 36 adults will mentor 83 teens, with the participants divided into smaller groups such as three adults and six teens. Members of each group will enjoy a weekly activity together, such as hiking, snowboarding (lift tickets are donated by Big Sky Resort, and snow-gear companies donate snowboarding and skiing equipment that the kids get to keep), and stocking shelves at the local food bank. In addition, each group will participate in a weekly evening workshop focused on character development and life skills, with topics ranging from reproductive health and drug education to communication and conflict resolution.

While BYEP focuses on at-risk youth, it is also available to serve youth who are considered potentially at-risk due to economic stress, such as 17-year-old A.R. A.R. comes from a family of five kids whose parents are separated. "Our family didn't have much money," she says. "We couldn't afford snowboarding. When I heard about BYEP taking in underprivileged kids as well as troubled kids, I thought that sounded awesome. Kids should just take a chance and get in the program. Just do it. It changed my life."

She has more self-esteem and confidence thanks to participating in BYEP, she says, and plans to attend Montana State University to study photography, entrepreneurship and teaching.

Kids can apply to BYEP's "Approach" program starting in the eighth grade, and are often referred by a school counselor. In 10th grade, any teen who has participated in the Approach program, whether for one trimester or more, can apply to the "Crux" program, which serves students from January of their 10th-grade year through May of their 12th-grade year. Devoted to promoting independent living skills, Crux supplies each participant with a laptop computer (which they get to keep if they complete the program), and the mentors coach participants on how to survive post-high school, including how to get a job and rent an apartment, or how to go to college.

In addition to the weekly mentoring activities and workshops, volunteers attend two training sessions each trimester. "In the training, we remind mentors that these kids have been told a story of failure, and that they'll try to replicate it, like a self-



fulfilling prophecy," MacFadyen says. Mentors are trained to encourage participants to persevere in the face of challenges, to not give up on themselves. The adults usually won't say, "You can do it," because the kids might not believe that they can. Rather, the mentor is trained to suggest, "If you just try this twist, see if that makes a difference."

Mentors are also trained to model skills that will help the child overcome personal challenges and to encourage the kids to measure their improvement against their own past performance instead of others' achievements.

One BYEP participant was kicked out of

school in eighth grade for bringing a knife with her and claiming she planned to kill a classmate. After three years of participating in BYEP and other programs, she was allowed back in school, MacFadyen says. "In fall 2011, when she was a senior, she showed her report card to the group at a Crux meeting. She said it was the first time in her life she'd ever made the honor roll. At our Crux graduation ceremony in May 2012, she raised her hand and said, 'I learned in here that people don't hate me.' She also said that in Crux she'd learned about the local community college, and had applied and was accepted into its two-year

bookkeeping program. When she finishes, I hope she'll come back and work for Big Sky Youth Empowerment."

### Start Making a Reader Today

Some children become at-risk teens because they fall behind academically. Mentoring young readers is one way to steer students away from a path that may lead to less fulfillment and happiness in the future. "Putting an adult with a child for a half-hour session helps generate enthusiasm for the reading process and builds confidence," says Chris Otis, executive director of Portland-based Start Making a Reader Today (SMART). "The earlier the intervention, the higher the probability they'll have academic success."

Some parents are worried when they learn their child has been selected by their teacher to be with a SMART reader, but the children see things very differently, says Margaret Morton, a Portland SMART volunteer and site coordinator (matching children with volunteers), who is also the mother of two boys who benefited from SMART mentoring. "A teacher at one elementary school won't call the program 'SMART,' because the kids who don't get to go feel left out. Every kid wants to go to SMART, but they can't all go, so instead she calls it 'Donna's reading program.'" (Donna is the site coordinator.)

Founded in 1992, SMART has served nearly 153,000 pre-kindergarten through third-grade children throughout the state of Oregon, with the help of nearly 104,000 volunteers who have logged more than 3 million hours of reading with students. SMART has also given away nearly 2 million books (every two weeks, SMART students select a book to take home and keep) over the past 20 years. The books come from community and volunteer donations, and from Scholastic, one of the world's largest publishers and distributors of children's books, which offers SMART highly discounted rates.

"We partner with schools that have a substantial percentage of students from low-income families, because of the lack of academic success associated with poverty," Otis says. The organization targets schools where at least 40 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

According to SMART research, a student who can't read at grade level by third grade is four times less likely to graduate from high school by age 19 than a child who reads proficiently in third grade. Add poverty to the mix, and that child is 13 times

*Continued on page 58.*

*Continued from page 22.*

less likely to graduate on time, Otis says.

Of the approximately 3,500 SMART students evaluated during the 2011-2012 academic year, only about 24 percent were at or above benchmark levels in fall 2011; by the end of the school year, the percentage had more than doubled, with about 58 percent at or above benchmark-level reading, she says. Nine in 10 SMART students showed significant improvement in attention span, confidence and self-esteem, she says, and nine out of 10 also showed increased enthusiasm for reading.

Teachers choose students for the program based on factors such as reading below benchmark levels, seeming unengaged or lacking confidence with their reading, not having many books in the house and not being served by other programs. Each volunteer reader works with only one student at a time, but may mentor up to two kids from the same school, and on average, 20 to 30 volunteers visit a given school each week.

Each session lasts a half hour. From a selection of a few hundred books provided at the location by the SMART program, the child picks a few books for the session, and the volunteer reads to the child or encourages the child to read. "Our volunteers, though many of them are retired teachers, do not teach phonics, spelling or grammar," notes Otis. "We're not here to replicate education, nor are we tutors. We're here to support the joy of reading."

Scott Dippel, principal of Patrick Elementary and Hanby Middle School, both located in Southern Oregon's Rogue Valley, says that the SMART program is a great attitude booster. "My kids are proud to be SMART kids. For them, it's like a performance. For a half hour, they get the undivided attention of this adult who's maybe a banker or retired police officer, and they get to show off what they can do."

Dippel says he sees the SMART program as "a very important part of our kids' education," especially as school districts grapple with budget cuts. The SMART program is sustained by grants and contributions, and provides its service at no cost to the school beyond the cost of making a room available, he says. "As school funding is being reduced, I see even more reason all schools should at least give their kids the SMART half hour."

Sam, a 24-year-old with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in acting from Western Oregon University, started as a SMART student in kindergarten. "I was one of six children with a single mother," he says. "She had





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a hard time giving us the one-on-one attention kids need. SMART filled that role for me."

Sam says he grew up poor, in small apartments in Portland, with no money for books. "My mother fully supported SMART. She saw it as a resource. She was not too proud to accept help."

While reading scripts and auditioning for acting roles in Portland this year, Sam decided to become a SMART volunteer himself. One of his students was shy and chose not to speak English with him, he says. "During our sessions she would only pick up this one car book with pop-ups. She wouldn't read, but she liked to slide the car. It drove me nuts. Finally, with my encouragement, she chose a book with a sick bear visited by woods critters wanting him to feel better. She made a breakthrough that day. All of a sudden, the words on the page engaged her. Instead of an object to play with, it was a story. She loved it. Now she wanted to read that story over and over, but it was OK, she was engaged."

SHAPIRO OF MENTOR: THE NATIONAL MENTORING PARTNERSHIP, hopes more adults will discover how rewarding it is to mentor a young person. "The expression of our values in America is how we spend our time and spend our money," he says. "The goal of each one of these nonprofits, if money and time were no object, would be to expand until their services were available to every child in need."

Johnsen of The First Tee of Greater Seattle notes: "We don't expect all of our kids to become great golfers. But we do believe that all of these kids can be great people." ■

Writer Scott Driscoll lives in Seattle.

## Mentoring Opportunities

January is National Mentoring Month, says David Shapiro, CEO of the non-profit organization Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership. For more information on volunteering, go to [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org), where information ranges from how to start a mentoring program to a database you can search for opportunities by ZIP code. Options range from one-on-one to group to e-mentoring, and from in-school to community locations ([www.mentoring.org/get\\_involved/become\\_a\\_mentor/volunteer\\_referral\\_service](http://www.mentoring.org/get_involved/become_a_mentor/volunteer_referral_service)).

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