

BIG SKY

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*On the cover: Lazy Y Ranch, Gallatin Gateway, MT.  
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Summer 2023



# Big Sky Youth Empowerment

## PROVIDING TEENAGERS AN ANCHOR THROUGH CONNECTION AND ADVENTURE

BY KATE HULL

Isaiah Parsons remembers walking back from Steep Mountain Tea House on Main Street in Downtown Bozeman, back to the Big Sky Youth Empowerment center just a few blocks away. It was his Thursday workshop day. Alongside mentors and his fellow BYEP peers, he was headed to spend the afternoon in curriculum programs, enjoying activities, and talking as a group about his highs and lows of the week. Most importantly, it was time to connect. On the way home, rain began to pour. Isaiah and his friends ran and laughed while their tea sloshed and spilt. Wet and full of belly laughs, they made their way back inside the center to begin the evening's activities.

"We didn't have umbrellas or anything," Parsons recalls. "It was pouring, we were all connecting, and we just laughed about it." This moment of connection is just one of the special moments that have a lasting impact on students like Parsons, who called this otherwise unassuming night one of his fondest memories from his time spent as part of BYEP.

Parsons is going into his senior year and has been a part of the nonprofit's youth programs since the seventh

grade. It has been a consistent part of his life and there are no doubt dozens of other students who would echo Parsons' sentiment. The nonprofit's mission provides opportunities for vulnerable teenagers in the Gallatin Valley to experience success and become contributing members of our community through group mentorship and experiential adventures.

Led by executive director Danica Jamison and program director Kayla Bradley, BYEP has been supporting regional youth for more than twenty years.

BYEP leads three twelve-week sessions a year that consist of workshop nights during the week with their group and mentors, and on Sundays the groups go on an outdoor adventure.

The workshop activities focus on communication skills, relationships and boundaries, healthy eating and more," Jamison said. "We have a cooking kitchen and they might learn how to cook a meal. Or they might do financial literacy." Each activity is designed for the age group. But no matter the age group, each workshop begins with a check in question that each student and mentor answers.



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*-Isaiah Parsons*



“The classic check in questions are: ‘What was the high of your day or week?’ and ‘What was the low of your day or week?’” Jamison said. “In sharing that, there is both the balance of acknowledging that everyone has things that we feel really excited and happy about and that we also all have things that we feel suffering about.”

“There’s something powerful about seeing that others are struggling as well or struggling differently or sometimes not struggling in the moment,” Jamison continued. “That up and down is a pretty natural experience that all of us have.”

Tara Slack’s son Lucien became involved with BYEP in the seventh grade. Lucien and his family moved to Bozeman during the pandemic, which prevented him from having the typical, in-person middle school experience necessary to form friendships, connect with the community, and feel a sense of belonging with his classmates.

Top: The BYEP headquarters are nestled in Downtown Bozeman.

Left: Adrenaline rush at Montana Whitewater’s zip lining course in Gallatin Canyon.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BYEP



“He talked to his counselor and they suggested he get a scholarship for BYEP,” Slack said. “We went through the interview process, received a scholarship and ever since joining [he] has been able to do these amazing adventures to places we didn’t even know existed, and meet friends.”

One exciting part for Tara is watching her son participate in activities her family would not typically have the opportunity to do. “He gets to do things he would never do,” she said. “He loves skiing and whitewater rafting, and he tries things he doesn’t really like, and he still goes.”

Beyond exciting adventures in the outdoors, Slack said she has also watched her son create a foundation for deep friendships he didn’t have access to otherwise.

“It gives them opportunities to try new things but it also gives them this base group if they are having problems,” Slack said. “For better or

Top left: All smiles and a bluebird day skiing and snowboarding at Big Sky Resort.

Below left: A snowboard session at Big sky Resort.  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF BYEP

**"The people make it special without a doubt in my mind. The activities are fun and the workshops are the best, but getting to talk to people is what makes BYEP, BYEP. They are some of the nicest people you'll ever meet."**

*- Isaiah Parsons*

worse, teenagers don't like to talk to their families about everything but [Lucien] has this group now that is confidant. His mentors help him to work through things that he wouldn't feel comfortable maybe talking to his mom and dad about."

The activities are no doubt an incredible part of the BYEP experience: from snowboarding to rafting, fly fishing, mountain biking—this list goes on. While experiencing all that Montana has to offer is important for life skill building, the overwhelming theme that is echoed each time a student or parent talks about the BYEP experience is the people.

"The people make it special without a doubt in my mind," Parsons said. "The activities are fun and the workshops are the best, but getting to talk to people is what makes BYEP, BYEP. They are some of the nicest people you'll ever meet."

*Kate Hull is a Victor, Idaho-based freelance writer and editor-in-chief at Teton Valley Magazine and enjoys biking, baking and enjoying mountain town life with her husband and toddler.*



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