

FINDING EMPOWERMENT

Kris Drummond

Why am I anxious? My brain is clogged, and the circle of people I'm sitting in feels cramped. It's my first day of volunteering as a mentor for Big Sky Youth Empowerment and instead of showing up with presence and compassion like I imagined I would, I'm breathing through body tremors. Then it hits me. This is how I felt in high school. I've transported a decade back in time and run into the issues of acceptance and belonging that adulthood doesn't actually erase. The 14 year olds eye me warily and my mind obliges with all the judgments that might be spinning in their heads. Without their saying a word, I've already rejected myself.

As the evening flows forward, relaxation replaces the discomfort in my body and what seemed like a mistake at four has become an inspired collaboration by five thirty. In ninety minutes, everyone has shared their high of the week, their low, and answered a piercing question into the nature their identity. We hold a rope as we "check in" to signify connection; belonging to something larger than ourselves. And while I'm the 27 year old adult who, in my own mind, is supposed to have all the answers, I notice my growing amusement that I'm the one struggling to keep up. The kids are sharing everything, from abusive family dynamics to gender identity issues to drugs to bullying, in a way that would astound most of us whose lives exist in the default "grown up" reality of anonymous, insulated culture. They speak with ferocity, words imbued with a certainty that for this night at least, their experience matters.

After a team-building activity in Bogert Park, the session ends and the kids leave, and I'm left with myself. Light waves of surprise wash through me. While the program caters to youth who by some standards are considered "at risk," it didn't feel that way. Rather than a collection of broken individuals needing "help," I found a vibrant collective; emotionally-open and unique teens who voluntarily joined the program, choosing to embark on the path of healing and personal autonomy that we all must eventually wander.

Beyond the surprise and fulfillment I felt sitting in my car after that first



session, there was also something deeper; excitement and a nebulous sense of inspiration. When I was in high school, vulnerability and personal responsibility were unknown and avoided. A privileged upbringing allowed the often-traumatic impositions of reality to remain hidden, so there was rarely a need to face myself or my actions. These kids don't have the luxury of ignorance, and while I know some of them live in very difficult situations, their willingness to join something like BYEP, to confront their lives with humility and honesty, to trust when they have known so much of betrayal, evokes an almost disbelieving gratitude. Most adults I know, including myself, understand little of such challenges and the courage required to face them. I'm convinced that when the kids I spent the summer getting to know grow through their teenage years, they will move into the world as creative, empowered, and fulfilled humans.

BYEP is the manifestation of founder and executive director Pete MacFadyen's inspiration and vision. After a career as a therapist left him disillusioned with the efficacy of one-on-one therapy, MacFadyen created

Big Sky Youth Empowerment in 2001 as an alternative. Rather than traditional therapy, which often creates limiting beliefs around being a "problem child," and is geared toward finding a "solution," BYEP allows kids facing adult problems a space to relax, be themselves, and explore their lives with the compassionate support of their peers. To me, true empowerment is radically reclaiming our own experience from the homogenizing forces of culture. Not fixing, solving, or even necessarily changing our lives, but actually owning them. By this barometer, Big Sky Youth Empowerment lives up to its title.

The structure of the program is brilliant. It's divided into two elements—the once-weekly evening session which is the group psychological component and the Sunday adventure, which is where kids get to be kids. The adventures span from ropes courses to skiing to whitewater rafting and are what set BYEP apart from other youth programs. The kids are given positive, enjoyable environments and the space to explore it for themselves. Rules exist, but not in the way



they're used to experiencing them. Each participant is required to commit to a 75% attendance rate as a way of learning accountability, and beyond that, it seems the golden rule is the general theme. Respect is implicit, and the kids hold each other to a high standard with little adult intervention required. And perhaps the most glowing thing that can be said of anything in this weird experience of life is the fact that BYEP is fun. Not just for the kids, but for everyone involved. Beyond all the official theories of how people heal, laughter seems to be a determining factor in the ability to let go and move forward from even the worst life situations. Offering kids that opportunity is a true gift.

Like all non-profits, BYEP faces issues of funding and staffing limitations. Over 100 kids are served (and up to 30 mentors trained and overseen) by a full time staff of only eight people, five of which work directly with the kids (one program director and four program managers). That means that five people, over the course of four years, offer each participant 1440 hours of support, exploration, and growth. Equally remarkable is the fact that every participant is awarded a full scholarship for the four year duration of their involvement in the program. All the ski days and workshops and zip lines and rides to and from their houses are provided freely, which seems impossibly miraculous. Running BYEP costs over a million dollars a year, almost all of which is attained through internal fundraising, and thanks to monumental efforts within the organization and generous support from the many donors, expenses were only \$10,876 more than income in 2015. Luckily wise planning and financial management left the program with a cash reserve of \$360,000 to absorb the shortage. And while BYEP currently has a safety net, it's still only a third of yearly costs and can quickly be depleted.

While I'm not presently mentoring with BYEP, the experience remains. I can't help but feel that the space of trust, openness, and compassion that defined my time there is something desperately needed in the callus, fear-driven culture that has taken over the global mind. Most often, I felt like I learned more from the kids than they learned from me. I watched them grapple with their challenges together through tears and giggles, and a part of me reawakened to what real community is about. Far from being "at-risk," I think the graduates of Big Sky Youth Empowerment will be some of the people uniquely capable of living in the world to come. They will understand real challenge, real collaboration, and what is required to overcome the seemingly impossible.

I don't know if the staff of BYEP share my sense of dramatic importance around what they do. They are simply caring people who are doing what they can to make a positive impact in the world. But what I see in them and the organization are seeds of a new way of being. Instead of stigmatizing and defining each other by our struggles, BYEP proved, at least to me, that there is another way. Sitting in those workshops, I witnessed alchemy in action as

dark pockets of pain were revealed and opened to, worked with and integrated.

With the Gallatin Valley growing at ridiculous speeds, BYEP hopes to adapt to meet the expanding (and largely unmet) need for reliable and effective support services. For the 24 new scholarships available this winter, there will be over 100 applications, and with about half the ideal building space, there are many challenges on the horizon. BYEP relies exclusively on the support of a community which has proven since 2001 that investing in the youth is a high priority, and hopefully will continue to do so for the indefinite future. In the words of executive director Pete MacFadyen, "Investing in youth seems, to me anyway, to be the best way to ensure we all nudge the 'needle' a bit more toward the collective Good. Creating opportunities for youth to experience success and ultimately become engaged contributing members of our community is an honor and I invite anyone reading this to join us in helping to ensure we are around for many more years...We ask that people join us by investing in our community. One of the great things about Gallatin County specifically and Montana more generally is this sense that we take care of one another. It takes the entire village from volunteer mentors to major foundations to keep our organization running at it's maximum efficiency. We could not do it without the generosity and belief of our neighbors."

To learn more about this wonderful program or find out how you can get involved, visit byep.org †

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