

'It's my favorite place in the whole world'

Empowerment group helps local youngsters embrace the outdoors

By **AMY MAY**

Lone Peak Lookout

Last year when Austyn Maier, 15, first took to the slopes at Big Sky Resort she was a little intimidated. Her snowboarding skills left something to be desired.

"It was kind of hard because everyone else in my group was better than me," she said. "But after I got to know everyone and got more comfortable, it was amazing!"

Maier, a freshman at Bozeman High School, is a second year member of the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project.

BYEP is a local program committed to connecting at-risk youth with the outdoors. The group spends the summer months rafting, fishing, horseback riding and climbing and the winter months skiing and snowboarding at Big Sky Resort.

This winter, Big Sky will donate \$70,000 worth of lift tickets to the program. Program participants will ski or snowboard at Big Sky in groups of six with three mentors once a week for most of the season.

Big Sky Resort's Public Relations Manager Dax Schieffer said he was pleased that the resort could be a part



Courtesy photo

Fun is a priority for members of the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project, an organization that, with the help of Big Sky Resort, helps children experience the outdoors and build a framework for future success.

of the Youth Empowerment Project. "What better way to develop strong relationships than being outside in nature exploring the mountains," he said.

Founded in 2001 by Pete MacFadyen, a former mental health counselor, the Big Sky Youth

Empowerment Project has been working to get hundreds of kids from the Gallatin Valley outdoors. This winter there are 48 participants, 24 from Bozeman and 24 from Belgrade.

"Big Sky has been a very strong supporter since the creation of this program several years ago" Schieffer

said. "We're proud that our support was able to get the program off the ground."

According to MacFadyen, the program's motto is, "Have fun and be outside."

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“We trust that if you spend 12 weeks skiing with a group of eight people, you’re going to get to know each other pretty well,” MacFadyen said.

In addition to spending one day every weekend shredding down the mountain, each group meets one night a week for workshops on everything from communication and life skills to reproductive health and conflict resolution.

Over the last seven year BYEP has gained a great deal of positive notoriety from kids and adults alike.

This winter there were over 120 applicants for the program, and only 48 were chosen.

According to MacFadyen, the program chooses participants based on four different criteria: risk factors, motivation, having the desire to be outdoors and how the child will fit in with the group.

At the beginning of the winter program all 48 kids come to the BYEP warehouse, which is stocked with \$50,000 worth of snow gear, to get outfitted.

With sponsorships from Dakine, Oakley and Arc'teryx, the participants are all equipped with top-of-the-line jackets, snowpants, and all the gear necessary to spend 12 weeks on the mountain. Participants who come to every workshop and ski session are allowed to keep the gear at the end of the season.

While the free stuff is always a good motivator, Austyn Maier said the new friends are the best part of the program.

“I see tons of my friends every day at school



Courtesy photo

With kids from the BYEP, a snowboard can become a make-believe guitar for a slopeside concert.

now,” she said.

And when asked if she’ll continue on with the program after this year, she said, “Definitely. If I didn’t, I’d freak out cause it’s my favorite place in the

whole world.”

For more details please visit their web site www.byep.org.