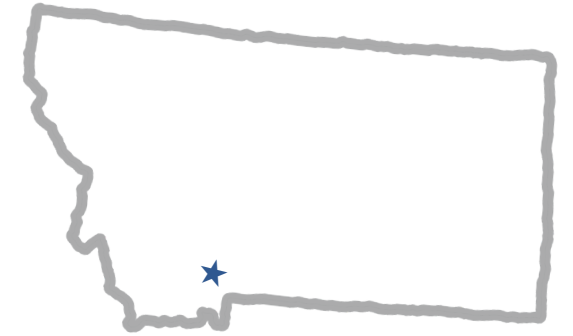




big sky youth empowerment



“IF IT WASN'T FOR BYEP, I WOULDN'T BE ALIVE.”



That's what Charlie L., a 2018 Big Sky Youth Empowerment (BYEP) graduate, said when asked where she would be if she hadn't joined the Bozeman-based nonprofit during her 8th grade year. In a state with one of the highest youth suicide rates in the country, Charlie's story is striking. Although BYEP doesn't operate on the premise of suicide prevention, BYEP participants frequently share the same sentiment that Charlie does: the community support and life skills they found at Big Sky Youth Empowerment were critical to their journey away from the decision to take their own lives.

For the past 18 years, Big Sky Youth Empowerment has operated under the mission statement to provide the most vulnerable teens in the Gallatin Valley with the opportunity to experience success. BYEP participants are the young people most likely to fall through the cracks: those exposed to trauma, neglect, loss, homelessness, and other challenges outside of their control. BYEP's adventure-based mentorship program is designed to strengthen and support these participants in all aspects of their lives, and it starts by meeting them halfway—giving them something inspiring, if not downright awesome, to do every weekend. Working with community partners, BYEP takes participants skiing and snowboarding at Big Sky Resort a total of 10 times each winter, providing them with 100% of the gear, transportation, and education they need to shred—all completely free of charge for each participant's family.



With 192 participants, 10 free ski days might seem like a lot— but it's actually just the beginning of BYEP's programming. The real power of BYEP comes from its world-class curriculum built around weekly workshops that teach participants the life skills that schools struggle to find the resources to address: from financial literacy and job interview skills to mindfulness, critical decision making, and community service. The workshops combined with a weekend adventure add up to 10 hours of programming a week, and with BYEP programs running year round, each participant has access to a total of 360 hours of BYEP programming each year— almost an hour a day, allowing Big Sky Youth Empowerment to achieve the depth of impact that turns a mentorship program into a community capable of changing and saving lives.

The final piece of Big Sky Youth Empowerment's mission depends entirely on community support— luckily, there hasn't been any shortage on that front. Each season, a small army of 40 young adults ranging from 21-30 years of age volunteer nearly 15,000 collective hours of their time to mentor the participants at BYEP. Their

commitment is as substantial as their impact; frequently, adults who can consistently be there for support are exactly what's missing from the lives of BYEP participants. Through their BYEP mentors, participants learn how to build relationships built on trust and follow-through. Many BYEP adventures, which over a year range from skiing to whitewater rafting and rock climbing, are brand new to the mentors as well as participants, giving mentors a chance to set an example for how to face new and sometimes frightening challenges. Perhaps it's not surprising that mentors frequently report that they get as much out of BYEP's programming as the participants do.

Ultimately, no discussion of curriculum will truly touch the heart of what makes Big Sky Youth Empowerment so powerful in the lives of participants and mentors. During each workshop, participants and mentors share their Highs & Lows for their past week, opening a space where each person in the group feels safe enough to share the most challenging aspects of their lives, knowing their story will be heard and respected, and that the people listening care deeply about

the details of their lives. As simple as this may seem, these check-in sessions provide something missing in the lives of most people, not just the at-risk teen population: validation. In the heart of a young person who feels they are not valuable in the eyes of their schoolmates and family, a community of people they can rely on consistently giving them their full attention and care is a more powerful salve than a prescription could ever be. "BYEP is my second family" is a phrase you'll hear from participants and mentors alike, and it is from that family atmosphere that BYEP breathes hope into its community.

Now entering its 19th year, Big Sky Youth Empowerment finds itself in a period of growth. With a newly renovated space scheduled to open in May 2020, BYEP is primed to expand its program offering in two directions. Starting in January, BYEP will launch its Ascent program, designed to support participants through their first year after high school when the full weight of adulthood lands on their shoulders. The following year, BYEP will expand its Approach Program, opening applications to BYEP to students in their 7th grade year. Depth of support

is BYEP's M.O., and by adding two more years of amazing adventures, awesome mentors, and life-changing opportunities, BYEP will increase not only the quantity of youth served, but the quality with which they serve them. The renovation will also include a Tutoring lab and a Maker's Space, giving participants the opportunity to improve their grades and learn new skills even when they're not scheduled for workshops or adventures. The new space will also have an Elective Room where community partners will be able to share their skills and crafts with interested teens. Consistency is key— simply knowing they always have a place to go where they will be heard and supported is a huge psychological boost to young people with lives dominated by turmoil.

All of this growth is rounded out by a renewed dedication to help young people face the biggest challenges of our time, starting with Montana's youth suicide crisis. In 2019, BYEP launched a 100K state-wide suicide awareness lecture series led by world-renowned clinical-psychologist John Sommers-Flanagan, Ph.D., to provide communities all over the state with a strengths-based approach to understanding and



communicating the topic of suicide. A key goal in the future of Big Sky Youth Empowerment is expanding the scope of its impact and finding ways to introduce BYEP's curriculum and approach to communities across Montana, with the ultimate dream of serving vulnerable youth throughout the country.

Big Sky Youth Empowerment's doors are always open to those interested in getting involved. Volunteers make BYEP's impact possible, and applying to mentor is easy through BYEP's website, www.byep.org. Of course, as a nonprofit, the key mechanism for sustaining the organization is community donations. Your gifts immediately go to work opening opportunities for young people who truly need them— you can make donations through the BYEP website, or by simply texting BYEP to 41444. Big Sky Youth Empowerment's business partners are an essential part as well, from providing job opportunities and adventure opportunities to sponsoring BYEP vehicles and projects, the businesses involved with BYEP are critical to the organization's growth in the community. Finally, in an effort to secure Big Sky Youth Empowerment's ability to change lives for

years to come, BYEP has started an endowment to allow more options for giving, allowing legacy gifts to provide an incredible foundation for Big Sky Youth Empowerment's future.

If you are at all interested in learning more about Big Sky Youth Empowerment and the ways you can make an impact, simply contact their Executive Director Robin Hill at robin.hill@byep.org or by phone at (406)-209-3204.



from our readers

I took my car in to get the winter tires put on in Polson only to have my jaw drop when I pulled into the parking lot... cars lined up along the street, all with four tires crammed in the back! This was going to take some time. No matter, I will treat myself to breakfast. On my way back to a table I passed your magazine. I have been picking through the magazine for years, but admittedly, had lost interest and so I no longer stopped to grab one. But today, something for some reason caught my eye when I walked by. Maybe it was the matte finish which makes it seem more artistic. Maybe it was the boldness of the photo standing out on the cover. I grabbed it and had an anticipation I hadn't felt in a while with a magazine. I opened it to find a whole new experience. It immediately spoke to me and I felt at home. The natural and artistic design are not only gorgeous, but representative of what brought me to Montana. Your inspiring quote upon opening the cover made me take a deep breath and smile. To see more thought provoking quotes throughout the magazine just kept me thinking. I am a details person, and the addition of the green ferns throughout the publication brings a sense of peace and tranquility. The layouts are advanced and done with an artist's intention. Lastly, I can't help but feel that the articles are drenched in rich content and meaning. Climate change, Sagebrush Woman, Taken By the Wind...

Thanks for bringing new life to a well intentioned publication. Keep up the great work and yes, it was worth the risk. —Jen Smith, East Shore Flathead Lake

book your appointment today!
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THE SPA

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mud or hydrating wrap
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HOURS

Monday–Saturday: 10–5
 Sunday: 11–4

