



Bozeman, Montana

# TURNING LIVES Around

## YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT HELPS DISADVANTAGED TEENS ONE ADVENTURE AT A TIME



Youth Empowerment Project Director Dave Granger explains snow conditions to the beginner ski group while skiing at Big Sky Resort.



Youth Empowerment Project volunteer Katherine Isaacson gives Natalie Pelletier, 17, a hug during the program's beginner class graduation.

**L**indsey Crouch, 17, was hooked on drugs and running away from home. Robert Stotts, 15, broke the law and was kicked out of Bozeman High School. Chaz Fregien, 18, started failing his high school classes after his parents divorced. Jena Bashor, 17, had dropped out of Belgrade High School. But all four students, now attending Bridger alternative school, have turned their lives around. Because of the Youth Empowerment Project, the students said, they have sobered up, remained in school, made new friends and stayed out of trouble. "I've been on a lot better track since I've been involved in this pro-

gram," Fregien said. "My grades are up. I haven't been in trouble in, like, a year and a half." The project for disadvantaged youth combines adult mentorship with outdoor sports such as snowboarding, fly fishing and rock climbing, giving the kids an opportunity to try sports they otherwise couldn't afford to do and teaching them a variety of life skills. "I was never able to go snowboarding before," Fregien said.

"My family's kind of poor," Pete MacFadyen, founder of the Youth Empowerment Project, started the program six years ago. A counselor with a private practice in Bozeman, he one day decided to weave his two passions: counseling teens and outdoor adventure. The pilot program in 2002 had five kids — all considered to be "at risk" — and five adult mentors. "These are not kids on the soccer team. These are kids breaking the

law," MacFadyen said. "These are the kids that are skipping school and showing up high or drunk for school." The program now operates in Bozeman, Belgrade and Livingston. Two hundred kids have participated since its inception. A winter program for boys and girls offers skiing and snowboarding. The summer fly-fishing program is for boys, while the girls do a wide range of activities, including rock climbing, rafting, horseback riding and hiking. All of the snowboarding and fly-fishing gear is donated, MacFadyen, and the kids get to keep the gear if they finish the programs. (More on Project, page A8)

*"It's just made me a better person. It really helped me a lot. It really changes you."*

— Lindsey Crouch, Youth Empowerment Project participant

Story by **TED SULLIVAN** Photography by **ERIK PETERSEN** of the Chronicle

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#### Mountains and mentors

This winter was the first time Crouch had ever snowboarded; the sport is too expensive for her to afford on her own, she said.

But this winter, she and the other students and their mentors went to Big Sky Ski Resort once a week for 12 weeks. The resort donates lift tickets. Snowboarding companies donate boards, helmets, jackets, boots and other gear.

The program's not all about recreation, however. The kids also meet weekly with their mentors for two-hour workshops on a variety of topics: communication, teamwork, relationships, self-identity and health.

The combination of work and play has been life-changing, Crouch said.

She quit using drugs, began hanging around better people and started making better choices for herself, she said. She has not been in any trouble for about a year. She is earning straight A's and plans on attending college next year.

"It's just made me a better person," Crouch said. "It really helped me a lot. It really changes you."

The mentors get a lot of credit for their role in her metamorphosis, she said.

"They're just awesome. I have a lot in common with them," Crouch said. "You can talk to them like you talk to your friends. They're just awesome people."

#### Staying out of trouble

Before Stotts got involved in the program, it seemed trouble was always around the corner.

He got in trouble with police for allegedly painting graffiti. He was nearly cited for

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— Pete MacFadyen, Youth Empowerment Project

underage drinking. He was kicked out of Bozeman High School.

But then he heard about the Youth Empowerment Project through a friend. Once he got involved, he found he loved snowboarding and didn't want to get kicked out of the program. He also didn't want to drink alcohol on weekends if it meant a hangover on the slopes the following morning. And he didn't want to let his mentors down.

"It kept me on my toes," Stotts said. "I was pretty much a good kid the whole time."

For Bashor, the program has allowed her to do things she couldn't do before. Despite working at a restaurant, she couldn't have afforded snowboarding or other activities.

Now, she is a good boarder. This summer, she plans to learn how to climb, raft and ride horses. She has new, "trustworthy" friends and is grateful for the adult mentors.

"It was just a great atmosphere to be in," Bashor said. "We all got to know each other and got to trust each other."

The program had 24 volunteer mentors — men and women — in this year's winter program, although 60 people applied.

The mentors get involved because they enjoy working

with youth, MacFadyen said, and some of them were in the program as kids.

#### Earning the privilege

This year, Fregien became a mentor for eighth-grade students in the Youth Empowerment Project.

"I want to teach kids and pass on what I've learned," he said.

At the same time, he also feels accountable to the younger kids who look up to him, he said.

"Being a mentor has taught me a lot about responsibility," he said.

Fregien can actually tick off a long list of things he's learned through the program: it's good to be busy, because when he's bored he winds up looking for trouble; listening to and making eye contact with other people are as much a part of communication as talking; and expressing his thoughts isn't as scary as he once thought.

The experiences of these four young people indicate why the Youth Empowerment Project has grown so popular, MacFadyen said. In fact, this winter he had 140 kids apply for 40 spots in the snowboarding program.

"It's a total privilege to do it. If you don't take it seriously, you get kicked out," MacFadyen said.

But for those who stick it out, the rewards are remarkable, he said.

"Every kid that's in the program is a good kid and can be successful," he said. "We're seeing kids who communicate and make healthier choices. It's powerful to see a kid's life change."

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