

Visit by Robert Kantar, Summer and Fall 2007

Ironwood, located in Morrill, Maine, offers a unique and promising option for young people in various states of adolescent turmoil. Students can be transported to Ironwood, but I think the best candidates are on the softer side of the spectrum. Ironwood is ideal for young people who can benefit from a highly structured but warm, nurturing environment. The program is appropriate for students who may need something longer than a wilderness program but may not be ready to be at home or go on to a boarding school. Young people who are struggling with lower level issues such as depression, oppositional behavior and mild substance abuse are best suited for this program. Truly delinquent adolescents may not thrive.

Ironwood is an experiential program with an academic component that can extend to six months with the goal of returning home for many participants. The Ironwood model evolves from an initial placement at a brand new base camp called Frye, which is located on a large tract of land owned and operated by Rod and Marion Rodrigue. Frye currently has three heated cabins, bathroom facilities and a kitchen surrounded by a primitive camp site that is isolated in the woods.

Using a behavioral modification approach, students have time to contemplate their anger and frustration in clear view of staff as they spend time alone to settle down. Other students who have already settled in after the initial adjustment phase are indoctrinated into a small community environment. While at Frye, participants build walls, make campsite improvements and spend time talking around the campfire. Pet kittens, a bloodhound and staff dogs create an atmosphere conducive to adjustment of the students to their new environment with relative ease. Ironwood utilizes a color-coded level system, determined by sweatshirt color. Students change levels relatively quickly moving from the initial hunter orange to yellow and ultimately through a series of steps leading to regular changes in sweatshirt color.

Once students move through the initial stages at Frye, they head up to the main campus, a beautiful estate home with a large horse barn attached, as well as an indoor arena. At this point in the program the students are relatively positive, and the lessons they learned while living primitively at Frye are expanded to a broader curriculum with more opportunities, including academic components. Academics are

delivered through online instruction, with oversight provided by an onsite instructor. Participants work at the farm learning all kinds of skills including horse care and riding skills, dog training, gardening, maple sugaring and natural resource management.

Clinically, Ironwood has a very sound approach incorporating group, family and individual therapy into their model. Therapists communicate regularly with families and other professionals working with their clients. Staffing plans are built into the therapeutic process in order to ensure that therapeutic goals are transmitted effectively to all staff members. Therapeutic, academic and family plans are created for each individual student so that each participant's needs are looked at on an individual basis. The staff is a unique mix of local people, competent social worker therapists and caring owners who all contribute to a family like atmosphere. The ownership is deeply committed and, as parents of an adolescent who struggled, is in a position to truly understand the population they serve.

Having had the opportunity to visit Ironwood on several occasions I have always been impressed by the cleanliness of the facilities, the ongoing facility improvements that are taking place, the pleasantness of the staff and the level of engagement that the students have with the staff, each other and visitors. Although Ironwood initially had some growing pains and staffing challenges, I have seen the program transform and grow into a well-rounded stable treatment program. The staff members are well qualified individuals who all communicate effectively, not only with participants but with parents and other professionals. Ironwood is licensed in the State of Maine by both the Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services which lends additional credibility to the program.

About the Author:

Robert Kantar is an IECA member in Vermont, who based this report on firsthand experience and visits over a period of time with this program. He believes it can be trusted to do what it says, concentrating its energies on the young people with whom it works. He accepts no fees from the program and does not write at the request of a program. Extensive evaluation of many factors, as each child is unique, determines whether this program would be appropriate for a particular student. For more information, visit www.bobkanttar.com, or call 802-626-4620.