

School counselor pilots wilderness program

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

Sisters Outdoor Leadership Experience (S.O.L.E.) is a pilot wilderness program at Sisters Middle School (SMS) being developed by Brook Jackson, mental-health counselor at the school. S.O.L.E. is similar to the middle school outdoor science program, but with a pro-social/emotional emphasis.

Jackson, whose position is funded by a mental-health grant to the Sisters School District, has a passion for working with young people, particularly for getting them out into nature as a way to help them explore who they are and to discover and appreciate the strengths they possess that don't always show up in the classroom.

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“I have gone through my own struggles. Whenever I need to find peace of mind, I take my dogs and go out into the woods,” Jackson said.

Amazing things can happen when you take students who have been identified as “at-risk” and allow them the freedom and natural consequences that nature provides.

“When you take these kids, who often have a great deal of

emotional intensity, and place them in an environment with physical intensity, there is a process that takes place causing the kids to bond in a way not possible in ordinary surroundings,” Jackson said.

He went on to explain, “Incorporating a wilderness component to support struggling middle school students provides an opportunity for these students to develop new skills and self-confidence, leading to an increased sense of hope, which is a key ingredient to improving mental health.”

The program is designed to address the needs of some of the 10 percent of the middle school population (35) who are receiving mental-health support individually or in a small group setting. Jackson is currently running two groups for eighth-grade boys, and it is from these groups that the students will come for the S.O.L.E. program. Most of these students are not receiving services through other school programs. In mid-May the boys will be taking a one-day hike to the top of Black Butte to prepare for their weekend in the wilderness at the end of May.

Jackson has received some funds from the City of Sisters’ Community Services Grant program, but he still needs more donations, both monetary and equipment. Just the cost of the bus for the one-day hike runs close to \$100. He is currently rounding up donated equipment and recently received several backpacks from Habitat for Humanity. Jackson is hoping to build 10 sets of basic backpacking equipment, including

backpacks, sleeping pads and sleeping bags.

For anything that is donated, Jackson plans to have the students do service projects in exchange so they can learn the importance of working to earn things and giving back.

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The outings will be more than just fun excursions. Jackson will conduct pre- and post-assessments on areas such as self-esteem, empathy, conflict resolution, and anger and anxiety management, using an empirically researched assessment tool to provide quantitative/qualitative data and efficacy for this type of program in a school.

During the outings, “hard” skills of packing a backpack, setting up shelter, leaving no trace, cooking over a fire, and fire safety will be taught. Jackson shared why this type of experience is valuable.

“Adventure-based, experiential learning allows children to become more self-aware and self-reflective, which assists them in controlling their behavior, making better decisions and being less impulsive. This type of program also helps them to

practice higher-level thinking such as planning, organizing and problem-solving. These types of learning opportunities have positive benefits in developing an internal locus of control, leadership, emotional growth, improved self-esteem and interpersonal relationships.”

Jackson worked for five years in the wilderness therapy industry as a wilderness guide for the Catherine Freer School in the Willamette Valley. He led 21- to 30-day backpacking and adventure-based expeditions for at-risk teens. While at Freer, he earned his certification as a drug and alcohol counselor. He also has a current Wilderness First Responder (WFR) medical certification, which is the industry standard for wilderness guides leading trips in the backcountry.

After leaving Freer, Jackson attended Oregon State University – Cascades

and earned his master’s degree in counseling, completing coursework in both the mental-health and school counseling tracks. The seed for the S.O.L.E. program was planted when Jackson did a graduate adventure-counseling project at OSU. He served as a counseling intern last year at SMS as part of his coursework.

Jackson’s dream for the future of S.O.L.E. depends on his position being funded again next year. He would like to eventually have the students from this year’s program return as mentors for future students. Next year he would like the students to participate in the planning and organizing process for the outings, which wasn’t possible this year due to the short time-frame.

To learn more about S.O.L.E., or to make a donation to the program, contact Brook Jackson, SMS, 541-549-2099 or brook.jackson@sistersk12.or.us.

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