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DORM

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Mitchell has turned its public high school into a boarding school, taking in students from afar and giving them a taste of rural life, some old-fashioned discipline, and a chance to stay out of trouble.

"There isn't much to do in Mitchell, and we try to make studying a priority," said Michael Carroll, the school superintendent who's also principal, athletic director, Spanish teacher and a substitute bus driver.

Students like Jaime, who pay only a \$75 monthly dormitory fee, see Mitchell's boarding school as a cheap alternative to private school. Townspeople see it as a way to save their high school from closing for lack of students.

County population has been shrinking for years. When Carroll arrived in 1975, Mitchell had 40 students in grades 9-12. Now there are 29, not counting dorm students, and in four years there may be only 15.

That's not enough to support a high school, Carroll said. Many students already endure long bus rides in from ranches; if Mitchell's high school closed, they would have to attend other schools at least 45 minutes away.

The boarding school prevents that. For every student enrolled, Mitchell School District gets \$4,500 from the state. By adding dorm students to keep enrollment steady, the high school can pay its four teachers and maintain its programs.

The dorm — three singlewide trailers stuck together near the football field — opened in September 1992. Its 14 beds, half for girls, half for boys, have been filled since February, with a waiting list of 25.

For some new students, the culture shock is severe.

From the school's hillside perch, a potholed road passes 50 or so houses before dropping down to Mitchell's business district: two stores, a gas station, three cafes and a post office.

That's about it. Outside town, cattle and sheep roam the valleys; logging roads climb into the forested hills. Mitchell is a place where they play country western music at school dances, a place where kids can walk the streets at night, provided they watch for deer bounding by.

It's also a place where people are expected to pull their own weight.

"Kids learn to get lost in the big schools," said Dennis Dalton, math and science teacher. "There's no way to get lost here. Everybody is noticed."

Mitchell is not running a reform school — a record of violence is the one automatic disqualifier for applicants — but discipline is stricter than at most public schools.

If a boy and girl are caught kissing in the hall, they may have to stand three feet apart the rest of the day. If students say "shut up" in Mr. Misener's class, they'll be writing "shut up" 1,000 times.

Dorm students must do 30 minutes of homework each night before lights go out at 10:15 p.m. For every D, an extra half-hour of homework is required; for every F, one hour.

Mitchell is not for everyone. Half of last year's dorm residents did not return this fall. And seven have been kicked out since the program began, four for drinking, one for smoking, one for sneaking off with her boyfriend for a weekend, and one for smuggling a marijuana bong in.

"If they don't want to be here, then we don't want them," Carroll said. "We're set up for the kid

who wants to come here, wants to do well, and wants to get along."

Those who stay seem to thrive, despite bouts of homesickness. Nearly all have improved their grades, and most participate in school activities and sports. In Mitchell, everyone makes the team.

Jo Ann Reynolds, 18, arrived last year after drifting in and out of classes in Astoria, on the Oregon Coast.

Her absences there weren't noticed, she said. "Nobody even cared. I didn't do my work, I got deeper in a hole, and I couldn't get out."

Now, her Ds have turned into Bs. She is student council secretary, and she's taking extra classes so she can graduate next spring.

Heather Sullivan, 14, came this fall. Mitchell saved her from a Portland high school where, she says, "there are drugs all over the place, and if you narc on somebody, you're dead."

Her tough shell — "I wasn't going to let anybody get close to me" — soon dissolved in the dormitory's cramped quarters.

The dorm is like any household with a teen-ager, times 14. There are shrieks when the phone rings, arguments over the shower, laughter and shouting and kids running by constantly.

Boys are on one side, girls on the other, separated by a dining area and TV room, where they park themselves on Montezuma's Revenge, a green velvet couch as ugly as it is comfortable.

Dorm life revolves around Margaret McDaniel, 44, a divorced mother hired to live there. The kids call her Mom, and she's always home when they get out of school, baking cookies, brokering arguments, bugging them to do their homework. For some students, she provides a sense of security they never got at home.

"A lot of them come from broken families," she said. "A lot of them have plain old been hurt out there. They can cover it up, but there's that sadness. All you can do is love them."

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