

Can Schools Include Rites of Passage into Their Program Mix?

by Ron Snyder

If you want to know if a wilderness-based rite of passage program can work in a public school, we are currently in our 11th year of such a program. We are an alternative school, but what we do and how we do it could be applied in many other school settings.

AS#1 is an experiential learning center specializing in kinesthetic and visual learning styles. Since 1970, AS#1 has served students who come from throughout the Seattle School District. The school has 252 students in grades kindergarten through eighth.

In 1991, AS#1 student, Jacob Ali Walker, gave us the challenge which started the program. He asked why there were no adulthood rituals for American adolescents as there are in Hebrew, African, Native American, and Aboriginal societies. He said that a driver's license, gang membership, pregnancy, and drug use were not acceptable membership criteria for adulthood in America. He wanted to know how he could have a rite of passage, and so we invented one.

A team of students, parents, and staff devised that first Rites experience. I drew on my training in outdoor experiential education and then we studied the rites of passages of other cultures, looking for their practices and intents. We became convinced of several requirements: 1.) The choice to participate was solely with the student (parents had to give permission, but not until youth had decided to join). 2.) the possibility of not completing the program had to be there. This had to be a test, not just a fun time. 3.) Completion of the program was key to membership in an exclusive club.

I led that first group of students and their teachers, on a 25 mile hike on the Olympic Coast Wilderness Trail. The students had prepared themselves by going on a series of experiences including: rock climbing, camping, hiking, running, sailing, canoeing and team building on a high and low initiatives/ropes course.

Each student had to earn his/her own money. That is still a requirement. For those without other opportunities, we've developed jobs at the school where students can earn money. For instance, we collect colored glass bottles. Students thoroughly clean them, and we sell them to a mosaic maker for 20 cents a pound. Most of the equipment is supplied by the school from donated or purchased items.

Each year, this rite of passage adventure leaves when school is closed for the summer on the first Monday after Father's Day. During the journey, students perform community service to the wilderness, participate in a day of silence, experience a night of solo on the beach with limited equipment, prepare and maintain their camp and food, and carry all of their gear on their back. The actual hiking/paddling time has varied from five to ten days. At the close of the trip, students participate in a special "dream stick ceremony". They are, as I refer to it, admitted to the club. They receive special words which only those who have completed the program know. Then a stick which has chosen itself for the ritual is presented. Each new member breaks off a piece of the stick and, along with a whispered dream puts it into the fire _ a prayer for the future. That stick is then carved with the date of the rite of passage and added to a growing pile of sticks in the school trophy case. To the casual observer, these sticks may seem out of place, but to the participants, they are among the most important items in the case.

The day after students return to the school, they are the hosts for a dinner of celebration and thank you, for two invited guests each. They prepare, serve, and clean up from the dinner. Following the dinner, each participant gives a speech of thank you to their invited guests to show appreciation to the people who have helped to make their life possible. At this time, they also receive a unique tee-shirt designed by AS#1 passage makers.

Over the years, we have used canoe trips, hiking journeys, and combinations of water and land activities. The results have always been positive. Almost every participant has returned to tell us stories about the importance of the experience for them. Many have reflected that their rite of passage memories have been a touchstone when things were difficult in high school. They say they knew that if they made it through their rite of passage, they could handle almost anything.

This year, 16 Rite of Passage participants plus staff are going to paddle in the high Cascade Mountains at Ross Lake. The students will paddle Diablo Lake, truck their canoes over Ross Dam to Ross Lake, paddle Ross Lake to Canada, and along the way they will climb Desolation Mountain. This adventure will take 8 - 9 days to complete, and when they return, they will join over 100 other members of the club.