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Nonprofit organization helps area youth see world

by Katie Niekerk

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Living in Colorado, it's easy to take our beautiful surroundings for granted.

But imagine not being able to sleep at night because you're so amazed by the stars of a clear sky. Or imagine smiling in awe when you encounter the towering Rocky Mountains for the very first time.

Thanks to Big City Mountaineers, a Golden nonprofit organization, underprivileged teenagers from across the nation are getting the opportunity to enjoy Colorado's wilderness – and learn valuable life lessons in the process.

Every July and August, BCM brings teenagers from Florida, Illinois, Texas and Ohio to participate in an eight-day excursion through Medicine Bow Wilderness, a trail and camping ground in northern Colorado. Many of the teenagers, ranging from 13 to 17, come from unstable homes. They have been placed in residential foster care facilities and recreational development programs, such as the YMCA.

The BCM outings are led by adult volunteers who donate their time and resources to make the program run smoothly.

"Essentially, we're a combination of Big Brothers Big Sisters and Outward Bound," said Mark Godley, executive director of BCM. "There are a lot of other programs out there similar to what we're doing. But what sets us apart and makes our organization so unique are the volunteers. These are people from the community who are not getting paid to do this. They truly want to spend their time with the youth."

A typical trip consists of five youth and five adult volunteers. The focus is on team building and personal relationships, as well as raising awareness about ecology and the environment.

The core activity of the outings is a five-day backpacking adventure. Godley said spending time in the outdoors in a team setting leaves a lasting impression on the teenagers.

"It's definitely a physical challenge, but it's more mental than anything," he said. "The interaction between the youth and the adults teaches them both so much. There's a one-to-one ratio of volunteers to youth, and that translates into real relationships. Where other programs may assign a number of youth to one adult supervisor, we want to keep that relationship as personal as we can."

BCM's program in Golden currently sends out eight summertime excursions, but Godley said a priority for 2004 is program expansion. He would like to fund two additional trips next summer and also initiate a yearlong correspondence between participants.

"A 12-month follow-up situation would definitely allow for continued interaction between

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the participants,” he said. “It’s already happening on a certain level. We have adults who talk weekly with youth they took out five or six years ago. We want to make that the expectation, something that happens all the time.”

Godley said the monetary support for BCM comes largely from corporate sponsors and volunteers, so the main concern of expansion is finding the right fit for youth.

“A lot of the teenagers we work with have never even been outside of their own neighborhoods,” he said. “It’s important that we get them out here and let them see the world a little more than they have.”

BCM was founded 14 years ago. It has been headquartered in Golden at the American Mountaineering Center, 710 10th St., for just over a year. The organization also operates out of California. Nationally, BCM works with approximately 125 youths and 125 adult volunteers. The program in Golden sees about 40 youths and 40 volunteers every summer.

For more information, call 800-644-2122, or visit its Web site at www.bigcitymountaineers.org.

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