

North County News
By Melissa Faulborn

There's a program available to high school students in various Westchester and Putnam districts that offers them the option of a very different way to spend their senior year of school. It's a program that teaches valuable life skills and relevant academics, things students will be able to use all their lives. It's a program that has a friendly, relaxed environment, while at the same time retaining a mature school status. It's a program that effectively introduces students to adulthood and prepares them for the "real world," Walkabout is a different kind of high school program aimed at students who could benefit from a change out of the traditional high school environment. Everything about the program is different; half the year is spent outside of the classroom. New environments become classrooms, and new things are taught in new ways.

The program has a strong focus on building self-confidence and a sense of direction for the future.

"Walkabout has given me endless opportunity," said Jessica Kohlberger from Brewster. "It has taught me that the af-filiations with my young age only restrict me as much as I let them. It's provided me with the foundation for my first experiences in the professional world." Talk to any of the teachers or students at Walkabout, and they'll give you a standard descriptive phrase: Walkabout is a full-year, highly selective, challenge-oriented program for college-bound seniors.

It was started in 1976 by Eugene Lebwohl and Peter Copen, who wanted to create a program that would serve as a successful bridge from adolescence to adulthood.

"Walkabout made me more mature." said Dan DePrincipe of Briarcliff. "It gave me more direction towards my future goals." agreed Bill Rodriguez of Valhalla.

The name Walkabout comes from a custom of the Australian Aborigines culture. When an Aborigine adolescent reached a certain age, he or she would be sent out into the wilderness to live alone for six months. This was called their walkabout.

It was a test of survival skills, to see if the adolescent knew how to survive with-out the protective support of the community that had been supplied for so many years. If, at the end of the six months, the adolescent had survived, he or she would return to tile community and be accepted as an adult.

The idea is applied as a metaphor to the Walkabout program. Students are taught how to survive in the world that is waiting for them after college. "Peter (Copen) and I created Walk-about because we wanted to provide an option for bright, 'march-to-a-different-beat people that would prepare them for college and provide all the skills - not just academics - that would make for success in the real world," Lebwohl explained.

"Very few alternatives are available for people who could benefit from some-thing different. Some people really need alternatives," he added. "We wanted to create one that would challenge, revive enthusiasm for learning, and serve as a foundation for the rest of life." Among other skills, students learn how to get along with other people, how to find the right job, and how to write an effective resume.

"Research shows that skills for life include academics, but also consist of many other skills, such as organization, time management, stress management, research, and presentation," Lebwohl said. "We as a society rarely give stu-dents preparation in these areas, but those are the skills that help in and after college. Peter and I wanted to provide a place that would give students all the skills that make for success."

The Walkabout year is broken down into sections, rather than quarters the way most high school years are. The first section is two weeks of ori-entation and icebreakers to get students used to the program, the teachers, and each other. The next section is the prepa-ration for and implementation of a five-day backpacking trip in the Catskill Mountains. This is where many of the interpersonal skills come in and students begin to challenge their limits and see just how much more they can accomplish than they thought they could. After the backpacking comes a community service project, and then a nine-week period of intensified academics. After the academics there is an eight to 10-week internship, then another session of academics. Then comes another back-packing trip, this time to the Adirondacks.

The program concludes with two weeks of student presentations and wrap-ups.

"I've worked here for eight years," said secretary Terry Kay, "and every year there's something different and challenging and exciting."

All academic requirements are covered at Walkabout and report cards are sent out just like any other high school. It's the way that credit is achieved that really sets the program apart. English is taken care of through Language Arts and writing classes that last throughout the year. Social studies grades are based on the community service projects, the internships, and classes during the academics. The backpacking trips count for gym credit. Health and environmental science classes, regardless of whether they are part of a student's graduation requirements, are given during academics.

Any other requirements a student may need, such as math, are also provided, and every student has the option of working on an independent study program about the topic of his or her choice. Some topics this year include art, photography, and Native American studies. "What I like most about Walkabout is the staff," said Rayanon Smith of Bedford. "They work with you to accomplish your goals, and spend a lot of time with you to help with any of your problems. I would recommend Walkabout to any college-bound senior."

There are 48 members of Walkabout 23, the Walkabout class for the 1999-2000 school year. Only a few students are selected each year from each of the 18 school districts that support Walkabout. The exact number varies from district to district, but is usually within the two-to-four range.

"I think Walkabout is fabulous," says Marilyn Capizzano, principal of York-town High School. "It fills an important need for students who want a different kind of system."

Walkabout has been recognized as a model education program for New York State.

"We can only take 40 to 48 students each year, but with the school's philosophy, structure, community, and form, it's a shame we can't take more," said teacher Rob Angiello. "I'm glad to be working here, and I remind myself of that every week. I've worked at traditional high schools, and it's very rewarding to be at Walkabout. I've never seen students grow more in one year."

The assortment of tastes and personalities to be found in the students is staggering. Everything, from outgoing and talkative to quiet and shy, a great appreciation for rap and alternative music to an obsession with all things David Bowie, can be found in the students of Walk-about 23.

"The best thing about Walkabout is having the privilege of interacting with some of the most unusual people I've ever met," said Chris Somerville of Chappaqua.

"I love working with the students because not only are they very bright, but extremely creative with a high diversity of interests. They tend to go on to do very interesting things in their lives," Lebwohl said. "I think many people come here because they really want to accomplish something and give back to the world, and that makes it a very special place." More than 90 percent of Walkabout students go on to college. College administrations have indicated the Walkabout program is a positive consideration for admission.

If you are the parent or guidance counselor of a student who may be a good candidate for next year's Walkabout, or if you are a student who thinks Walkabout sounds like the perfect program for you, further information can be obtained by calling Lebwohl at (914) 248-3612. The Walkabout newsletter can also be obtained in high school guidance departments.

Melissa Faulborn is a member of the Walkabout program and worked on her internship at the North County News.