

## ***EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM MIXES 'LIFE SKILLS' WITH ACADEMICS. (Westchester Weekly Desk).***

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Source: [The New York Times](#) (June 2, 1985)(1655 words)

### **The New York Times**

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DRESSED casually in blue jeans and T-shirt, 18-year-old Debbie Fitzgerald stands in front of the class, leading a discussion about environmental policy. Her manner is confident as she fields questions from her classmates seated in chairs around the edge of the room. Most striking is the degree of engagement among them, the attentive hush in the room punctuated only by the exasperated sighs of students waiting to be called on, and an occasional ripple of laughter.

The class is environmental science and the school is Walkabout. The school offers a public-educational program limited to about 30 students from throughout northern Westchester and Putnam. One room in a house on the Fox Meadow campus in Yorktown Heights is the base of this innovative institution, which is now winding up its eighth year of operation.

As unusual in its approach as it is impressive in results, the Walkabout program combines experiential learning - such as leading a group discussion - with academic subjects to create what Eugene Lebwohl, a co-director, described as a "bridge between adolescence and effective adulthood."

Named one of the top-40 experientially oriented educational programs in the United States by the National Institute of Education, Walkabout is designed for students of average to gifted ability. Its overall goal, Mr. Lebwohl said, is to help students acquire the full range of positive attitudes and skills needed to be effective in their lives - both in and beyond college.

"It's one's attitudes and life skills as much as academic skills that are critical in making one effective in life," he said. "So learning to handle responsibility, participate in a group, identify and achieve goals, take risks and have more confidence are all important aspects of our program."

Academic courses are provided in two 10-week segments during the year, he said, and include English, Social Studies, Environmental Science, Health and electives. Other learning is designed to occur through a three-week volunteer service project, a nine-week

career internship and two weeklong backpacking trips. Students can earn four to six academic credits toward either a Regents or non-Regents diploma during the year.

The program is available at no cost to students from the 19 school districts in northern Westchester and Putnam (which support it), and is administered through the curriculum research division of the Board of Cooperative Educational Services. Transportation to the program's Fox Meadow facility is provided by buses servicing the nearby Boces technical center.

Mr. Lebwohl and Peter Copen, the other director, designed the program nine years ago after extensive research. Inspiration for the project came, they say, from an article by the educator Maurice Gibbons exploring applications of a custom among aborigine tribes in Australia called "walkabout." In that tribal "rite of passage," adolescents spend a period of time in the wilderness demonstrating their competence and marking a transition into adulthood.

"Peter and I wanted to create an educational program that offered not only skills for college but ways to build the self-confidence and positive thinking needed to take on challenges and become successful, contributing adults," Mr. Lebwohl said.

Students begin learning about challenging themselves, in fact, early in the Walkabout school year when they and the program's four staff members embark on a weeklong backpacking trip to the Catskill mountains. The physical demands of the hike, participation in a group and academic learning combine there to form what Mr. Lebwohl called a "small, but powerful part of the program".

"We use the mountains as a metaphor for personal accomplishment," Mr. Lebwohl said. "When students challenge themselves in the mountains, they usually find they can do more than they thought they could. A new norm begins to develop among the students in relation to challenge."

Karen Migliaccio, a 17-year-old senior from Vista, said the sense of accomplishment she had experienced on the hike had helped her since.

"I used to procrastinate a lot, because I wasn't sure I could do things," she said. "Now when I'm faced with something, I look back at the hike and say, 'Look what I did there. If I could do that, I can do this, too.'"

Back on campus, students settle into a more traditional classroom setting. While some identify the academic work as the most difficult part of the program, virtually all the students point to gains they feel they have made in both their skills and their attitudes toward school.

"You are responsible for your own actions here," said 17-year-old Colin Simpson of Somers. "You get what you get at the end of the year - the work is really your responsibility."

"I'm excited about school now," added Miss Migliaccio. "I found out I really do like to learn and that I want to go to college to learn. Before, it would've been for my parents, now it's for me."

"Each staff member's enthusiasm for the material he or she teaches is an important factor in the success of our academic program," Mr. Lebwohl said.

There is no less interest apparent in the nonacademic skills taught at Walkabout. In the "Life Management Skills" class students learn, for example, how to communicate assertively, solve problems, set goals and manage stress. For some, such as Miss Migliaccio, learning these skills has had a positive effect on relationships at home as well as at school.

"My parents and I get along so well now," she said. "I feel like I've grown a lot, and that they're treating me more as an adult."

Parents confirm these gains, and have been among the strongest advocates of the Walkabout program, Mr. Lebwohl said. In a survey of parents conducted two years ago, 100 percent of the respondents said their child's participation in Walkabout had positively affected family life.

"The most impressive thing to me about my daughter's gains in the program," said Leigh Merlini of South Salem whose daughter, Katy, is a student at Walkabout, "has been her increased self-esteem, self-reliance and ability to handle responsibility. I think what she has learned goes way beyond just taking notes in a class and getting good grades."

David Owen of Yorktown said that while his daughter, Jenny, had previously performed adequately in school and was without behavioral problems, Walkabout had helped her realize further untapped potential.

"Our daughter lacked a lot of confidence before Walkabout," he said. "But there she learned about the things she was good at, learned how to manage her time, and all of a sudden the kid just blossomed!"

Researchers studying Walkabout's effectiveness have confirmed the testimony of those involved. In addition to academic gains commensurate with those of traditional high-school control groups, a state study found dramatic increases in self-confidence and motivation levels among the students who completed Walkabout. Chances of this improvement occurring randomly without intervention were placed by the researchers at 1 in 1,000.

Beyond their own personal gains, students are encouraged to explore issues of responsibility toward others and spend three weeks doing volunteer work. These community-service projects are intended to help students learn "that they can make a difference in the world, and in fact have a responsibility to," Mr. Lebwohl said. Such projects have included working in hospitals, schools, nursing homes and for

environmental organizations. Students are supervised at their projects by one of nearly 100 "community-resource people" contributing time to the program each year, and academic assignments are given to complement the field work.

"The name of the game in Walkabout is 'transferable skills,'" Mr. Lebwohl said. "Everything learned is meant to be transferable to other areas."

Among the most transferable experiences, according to the students, and one that many cited as most valuable, is the nine-week career internship that takes place in early spring. As with the volunteer project, students choose and arrange the internship according to their interests and career goals and have worked in areas including veterinary medicine, journalism, film making, small-business operations and law, among others. Making the plan become a reality is often an important part of the learning.

"I found out what it's like in the real world," said Mr. Simpson, whose internship as a disk jockey at a radio station led to a regular shift. "The first 10 stations I called turned me down. But I had to keep trying and finally got a station to hire me. I love it, and now I know I want to major in communications next year in college."

An estimated 85 percent of Walkabout students go on to college. For some of the students, work completed in the internship has been instrumental in gaining acceptance to the college of their choice. One student initially rejected from a school of architecture took a portfolio of her internship work (done at an architecture firm) to the admissions department of the college. The decision was reversed and she will enter the college next fall.

Peter Valkenberg, 18, of Chappaqua, said he had had a similar experience. Skills demonstrated during his internship in the kitchen of the Tarrytown Conference Center helped him gain admission to the Culinary Institute of America.

Mr. Owen of Yorktown, in addition to being a parent of a current Walkabout student, works as a guidance counselor at Ossining High School. While Walkabout "is not for every student," he said, it is regarded highly by most college admission boards.

"I have found that if a student has been through Walkabout, it is a decided and distinct advantage in getting into college," he said. "Students tend to be more sure of what they can do, and this comes across in college interviews."

But the best testimony for the Walkabout program continues to come from the students themselves, and it is perhaps best summed up by Christine Cappuzzo, 18, of Carmel.

"I was a lucky person to have come here," she said. "Real lucky."

Applications for next year's Walkabout program are now being accepted. Information can be obtained by calling Mr. Lebwohl at 245-2700, extension 377 or from local school guidance departments.