

The Gazette

Walkabout teaches purpose to local high school seniors

Where do local public high school senior hike mountains? Persuade hospitals to allow them to work as interns in dream research or veterinary medicine? Work for service organizations like Greenpeace or the Ossining Community Action Program all as part of the curriculum?

At Walkabout-an alternative high school program headquartered in Yorktown Heights.

Now in its tenth year, Walkabout has become a popular choice for seniors from 14 local school districts including Briarcliff Croton-Harmon, Hendrick Hudson and Ossining. This year 38 students were selected from 140 applications to attend the program.

The director of Walkabout, Eugene Lebwohl explained that the goal of the program is "to create a bridge either to college or the real world. It's useful for a lot of students. Many may leave high school with academic skills but some don't leave with the confidence or sense of direction or self-management skills which are necessary for both."

When Mr. Lebwohl and Peter Copen conceived the program they focused on "the bright under-achiever". Now, because of the sparse alternatives the profile of the students falls into two categories. It includes students who are "bright and who are achieving up to ability - but who really need a change from the format of the traditional senior year," Mr. Lebwohl said. "We have adhered to the vision - which is part of the success," he continued. "We have developed a highly powered program focused on that. We get results." Although only 70 percent of the students say they are planning to go to college when they begin the year, between 90 and 95 percent in the last three years have entered colleges after high school graduation. Many of the students credit Walkabout with enabling them to be accepted in colleges where they would not have previously been considered. Colleges and Universities such as Princeton, Amherst, Ohio, Wesleyan, SUNY New Paltz/Purchase, Antioch and Bard have indicated that Walkabout is a positive consideration for admission.

Mr. Lebwohl said that students have gone on to attend the spectrum of colleges from Ivy League to state colleges to the Rochester Institute of Technology and Rhode Island School of Design. He attributed the students success partly to their ability "to pick up their performance and increase their range." And how do the seniors feel about the program? "Magic," quoted young man "Really changed my life," is a recurring theme from the students. And one graduate practically deified Mr. Lebwohl.

Many parents credit the program with an improvement in family life. The students gain a sense of responsibility and confidence which is reflected by their parents treating them more like adults. "It's been a win-win change," one of the parents reported.

Although academics are emphasized in two 10-week sessions during the year to continue to build skills, Mr. Lebwohl said that a body of relevant information and self-management skills are also introduced "so students can use the rest of their lives. It's not only English and Science but learning study, time-management and stress skills."

There are two 'wilderness experiences.' In the fall the students backpack for a week in the Catskills and in the spring they go to the Adirondacks. Mr. Lebwohl confirmed "it is a powerful vehicle for building a sense of community which is part of the program.

It challenges the kids to go beyond their perceived limit" Mr. Lebwohl continued. "The mental skills it takes to climb a mountain are the same it takes to write a paper or stick with a difficult internship. The skills are transferable."

One parent wrote about her daughter's discoveries, "... Val learned, probably for the first time in her life, what she was capable of. She learned cooperation during the trip. She gathered a tremendous amount of confidence from carrying her pack for five days in the mountains. Val learned she could carry out a difficult task and exceed the limits she had set herself."

A four-week community service project encourages the students to develop organization and planning skills and to experience serving others. They immerse themselves in their chosen project four days a week while continuing to do academic work. The program is highly supervised with the instructors visiting the students at the site of their project.

"Before Walkabout I was afraid of the future. Now I'm excited and curious about what the future will bring."
Matt Frohman

The Walkabout staff guide the students but the selection and planning for the community service project is their own work. The process helps the students become aware of what they want to do, learn how to find the right agencies and then contact them for an interview. These skills carry over into their future lives.

A sampling of the service projects completed by the students could include the New York Aquarium, Briarcliff Nursery School, Pegasus Handicapped Riding Program, Sierra Club International, Blythedale Children's Hospital, the Museum of Cartoon Art and the American Civil Liberties Union.

During an eight to 10 week career internship in the early spring the students work with a mentor in the community in an area of potential career interest. Mr. Lebwohl said, "It gives them a chance to test dreams and find out reality. We will teach them to fish and monitor them while they are fishing. "It's a real immersion experience," he continued. "The concentrated quality tends to be a powerful simulation of what a profession is really about, it becomes a powerful motivator for future academic learning - students suddenly have something to work for." It seems the students are only limited by their own imaginations as they have worked at computer research at the Thomas Watson IBM, as a disc jockey at WARY Radio Broadcasting, in sports medicine at Mt. Kisco Sports Medicine, a reporter at The Gazette, hotel management at the Hudson River Conference Center, a social worker at Runaway Youth Network and assistant at the Navajo Indian Reservation in New Mexico, to name a few.

Students can earn four to six academic credits toward their Regents or Non-Regents diplomas for their work at Walkabout.

Transportation to the program is provided by their own school district.

Mr. Lebwohl explained that the students can continue to be part of their own school. "Our goal is to open up, not to close doors," he said. Some students chose to do electives in their original high schools and to play sports on school teams. They are encouraged to keep in close contact with their guidance counselors.

Matt Frohman, the student who did his internship in New Mexico wrote, "I am confident in what I am going to do after graduation because I really have the ability to do anything. Before Walkabout I was afraid of the future. Now I'm excited and curious about what the future will bring."

Mr. Lebwohl and Mr. Copen spent a year researching the best educational programs in the United States before starting Walkabout. For the first three years the program was funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Family Fund and New York State. It was then evaluated by the state and considered "a model." "A high accolade," Mr. Lebwohl said.

Researchers have confirmed the effectiveness of the Walkabout program. A study found remarkable improvements in the student's motivation and self-confidence levels compared with control groups from traditional high schools.

Many students discover Walkabout through word of mouth or from graduates and their parents who have become the program's biggest supporters, according to Mr. Lebwohl. But the director encouraged anyone who is interested in finding out more about Walkabout to call him at 914-248-3612.