

Boundless Adventures changes young offender's hopes for future

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At an uptown café, Julie's eyes well up as her son, Roger, lays out his long-term plan. First, he'll finish high school. Then maybe some college. After that, he doesn't want to stay put.

"I want to do something with travelling," he says. "And the outdoors."

Under her breath, Julie repeats the word "college." She explains later: "Two years ago, you would never hear 'graduation' – let alone college, let alone plan. His plan would be for five minutes from now."

Roger, 19, had a hard time in conventional high schools. He wanted to get it done, he says, but "nothing was adding up." Finding work was tough, too – he couldn't get much without a diploma.

Because he is a past young offender, Roger's family name has been omitted. Looking forward instead of backward, he and his mother are deliberately vague about his past: He got mixed up with the wrong crowd, didn't always make the right choices.

Now, though, he's almost finished high school. He's armed with a plan. He's thinking about his future.

Roger spent the past year outside of Toronto – it was the first time he'd left the city for a significant amount of time. He headed to the Ottawa Valley, to a place called Boundless Adventures. After the better part of the year, Roger was back on track to finish high school; he should be ready to graduate in January 2012.

Boundless is a summer camp-turned-independent school set upon 600 acres on the Madawaska River. It's an "alternative education centre" that works with marginalized and at-risk children and adults that leverages the adventure of the outdoors as a means of social rehabilitation – and, in the case of people like Roger, a way to get high-school credits.

Over 18,000 people have gone through Boundless Adventures' programs. "That's a lot of bug repellent," says Steven Gottlieb, the program's founder.

Mr. Gottlieb founded Boundless Adventures nearly 30 years ago while studying at the University of Toronto. "I was passionate about the outdoors, and decided to make a career out of it – but I wanted to work with people who wouldn't normally get an opportunity to thrive in such a setting." He created Boundless initially as a summer camp, but by the late '80s, it was open year-round. In 2004, it was certified as an independent school – allowing it to give out high school credits.

“We realized that just being an outdoor program doesn’t make enough of a dent in the lives of our kids,” Mr. Gottlieb says. “We need to help them get a diploma. To get a diploma, their future is filled with promise, and their risk of criminality drops significantly.”

Boundless works with gang members, students who’ve been suspended, and any student who’s been left behind in the regular system. The Kiwanis Club of Toronto Foundation noticed this – especially because they often work with those same groups. And they selected Boundless Adventures over nearly 50 other organizations to win its first-annual community achievement award, worth \$75,000.

“We saw that what they were doing was especially significant because they were helping these children to acquire leadership skills to complete some of their high-school credits,” Bill Hines, the foundation’s president, says. “We thought that was admirable, quite frankly.”

The foundation gave the award such a substantial value, Mr. Hines says, “to make it something people would notice and could hopefully do something with.” Boundless will use to help grow the school, building up supplies of everything from canoes to satellite phones.

The foundation presented the award to Boundless Adventures recently in the mayor’s chambers at City Hall.

Boundless offers two different programs, explains Mr. Gottlieb: a single-credit summer course for all students, and a September-to-June program for at-risk students. In what Mr. Gottlieb calls a “Robin Hood scenario,” the revenue generated by the summer program helps pay for the year-long program.

Boundless also works with adults who’ve acquired brain injuries or who have mental illness, and families who are victims of violence.

The organization also works with a number of community agencies in Toronto to both develop and evaluate its curriculum.

Roger says that being immersed in Boundless’s program helped him be a better student.

“You’re living with [the staff], so you create a relationship. They’re friendly, but you’re also learning from them and getting your education done,” he says. “It’s learning from a friend, and it’s easier to learn from a friend than to learn from a stranger.”

“We like to freak out and inspire our students to overcome obstacles,” Mr. Gottlieb says, “And in doing so, they return home utterly inflated with pride, more selfless, and they know what it means to get someone’s back. Roger was really a champion of those outcomes.”