



Natural remedies

Grant Schafer ('05) helps at-risk youth in the wilderness

For many students, summer is a time to go home, earn money, lie around the pool, eat Mom's cooking and hang out with friends from high school. Social work major Grant Schafer ('05) had a much more ambitious plan for summer 2002. He traveled to Loa, Utah, and worked as a field staff instructor for Alternative Youth Adventures, a program designed to rehabilitate juvenile offenders.

From May 13 to Aug. 4, Schafer lived in the wilderness with several JMU alumni, hiking and teaching troubled youth the value of teamwork and self-respect. The experience was "very beneficial" and reinforced his desire to be a social worker, he says.

Schafer first became aware of AYA through his adviser, social work professor Karen Ford, who informed him that JMU alumni Kris Nelson ('99), Brad Farmer ('00), and Jim Ohmer ('99) were AYA employees. The AYA four-phase program mission is to remove students from their comfort zones and immerse them in new and unique situations designed to foster growth and behavior change.

After conducting interviews over the phone and through e-mail, Schafer was "gung-ho" about going to Utah. "I was planning on spending my summer out West anyway. I was going to go to Montana, but when that didn't work out, I decided that AYA was a great opportunity," says Schafer.

Schafer did have some apprehension about traveling all the way to Utah alone, without a car, and with a plane ticket that didn't return until August. "My dad said that I could talk all day about wanting to work with kids and do social work or I could just go do it since I had this great chance. He was right, so I went ahead with it."

After arriving at the Salt Lake City airport, other AYA employees drove Schafer four hours to reach Loa. On arrival, he found that "It was really laid-back, low-key, and flexibly structured. We pretty much had the freedom to do what we wanted. The first thing that I noticed was that people who work in the wilderness are very free-spirited, and that made for a very relaxed environment."

Before the program began, Schafer participated in intense training. "The main theme of training was to build empathy for the students in the program," Schafer explains. "We trained in basically everything that the kids do in the program. We hiked for eight days, cooked all our food, ate out of a cup, carved our own spoons, wrote a daily journal and called our name out while we were going to the bathroom [in the wild]. We learned teaching techniques from the education director and studied our field manuals. With this training, we mastered the daily routine of the program and learned the standards that staff need to uphold - such as calling students out when they used profanity and facilitating a "word circle," where we make them list 15 alternative words they could have used and write five statements on how they were feeling."

After training, Schafer began working with students in the first 45-day program of the summer. In this all-male program, he and two or three other instructors worked with 12 youth offenders, Team Bravo, in a rotating schedule.

Throughout the summer, Schafer worked eight days then had six days off, during which he and his friends backpacked and traveled to six national parks. Schafer visited Capital Reef National Park, Arches National Park, Canyonlands National Park, Bryce Canyon National Park and the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park. He says that his favorite national park was Arches, near Moab, Utah, because "the natural arches formed by wind, rain and erosion were spectacular and mind boggling."

Schafer says the best hiking was in Bryce Canyon. "My dad and I hiked in the canyon among the 'hoodoos' that are like half arches. Hiking among the hoodoos made me feel as though I was on a different planet. All of the national parks were amazing and made me feel quite fortunate that I was able to visit them. So many Americans are not able to witness the beauty that I was able to see."

When not hiking, Schafer was responsible for juvenile offenders who had violated their probation two or three times and who had originally gotten in trouble via theft or drug charges. "The interesting thing was that a lot of the kids told us about things they had done that were a lot worse than what they actually got caught for - you would be surprised," Schafer says.

Schafer taught science for high school credit, hiked with students daily, lead group discussions, and basically "facilitated their day." The AYA program is based on the motto: discipline + love = relationship = change. Schafer explains, "This motto helps students to change their attitudes towards relationships in their lives and disciplines them to stay that way."

Part of this process was the team-building exercises that Schafer helped oversee. One of the activities was constructing a Native American Fire Kit. Students worked in teams to cut down trees, build the fire kit and cook food on it. "This taught them persistence, teamwork and perseverance," Schafer says.

AYA teaches students through a curriculum book as well as a growth book. In the growth book were specific stages that had to be checked off before the students could progress. The book exercises are based on Steven R. Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, which everyone involved in the program was required to read.

When students graduated from the wilderness program, they traveled to Salt Lake City for the last stage of AYA. Most of the youth were from Salt Lake, where they participated in another 45-day program, held in a secure detention center. If a student did not graduate from the program, he was sent to another program, a foster home, a juvenile jail or was required to stay in the wilderness for another 45 days.

Schafer says that one of the most interesting things about the program was seeing the youth's progression. "There are two kinds of kids in the program," he explains, "the ones that had a really bad attitude, were ticked off, and wouldn't do anything that they were told to do. And there were the ones who acted perfectly and did everything right. I tended to like the kids who misbehaved more, since the others seemed fake, like they were trying to please us. They were not being themselves, which is the ultimate goal."

Schafer found that one of the most common things that all of the kids would say is 'I can't.'

"That really means 'I won't,'" says Schafer. "We taught them that they can do anything and that they shouldn't blame whoever caught them for their mistakes. They have to take responsibility for their actions."

Schafer's favorite student was Robert. "He had a horrible family life," says Schafer. "He had done so many drugs that he had brain damage, had trouble reading and speaking and looked intimidating, with tattoos all over, some of which he had done himself, including one that said '987' for 'cop killer.' His group made fun of him at first because of the way he read and talked, but he was incredibly determined and tried hard. He ended up graduating from the program, and became one of the leaders of the group. His team respected him, but more importantly, he respected himself."

Inspirational stories like Robert's have made Schafer want to continue working in the social work field, either in the area of troubled youth or the homeless. His interest in social work was sparked when he went on an Alternative Spring Break program in Southwest Baltimore with the Catholic Campus Ministry. The group built a prayer house for recovering addicts. "Ever since then, I've wanted to help people," says

Schafer.

Schafer isn't sure if he will return to AYA for summer 2003, since he wants to travel in Europe. "If I do, I would rather work in the after-care program in Salt Lake, because it's more suited to me than the outdoors," he explain. "But I don't like to make plans, I'll have to see what I'm going to do."

Schafer describes the people he met at AYA as "gypsy-like. These people and my summer in Utah made me realize that life doesn't have to be such a timeline."

For more information on Alternative Youth Adventures, visit www.ayanational.com.

Story by Allison Mall ('04)