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Climbing toward self-esteem: Ropes program provides catalyst for personal growth

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Climbing toward self-esteem

Ropes program provides catalyst for personal growth



PARTICIPANTS of the Ropes of Winnebago course from SAD 46 Options school found the Giant Ringfinger exercise to be the most rewarding group activity. After a half-hour of work and two failed attempts the group brainstormed to come up with a solution to lift a tire off the 20-foot tall post. Greg Wilber positions himself on the shoulders of Ed Hummel and Jarrod Jette (l-r) to gain an advantage over the tire. Making up the base of the pyramid and spotting for safety were (clockwise from left) Tom Nutter, SAD 46 Board chairman; John Parola, course instructor; Katherine Thompson, Options instructor; student Lisa Mann; Rob Liebow, Dexter Regional High School Principal; Patsey Smith, Alternative Education Coordinator; student David Bell; student and Ropes assistant Alex Guiski; Substance Abuse Coordinator Theresa Boettner; Substitute Instructor Jeri Pitcher and students Ann Fanjoy and Louis Morong. (Sawtelle)



TRUSTFALL - Jarrod Jette trusts his well-being to a cluster of his classmates and instructors during morning ground activities in the Ropes of Winnebago program. The program was seen as a success by every participant. "It is for me," said one male student. "I didn't know I could do half the things I've done here." (Sawtelle)

'Failure is a part of life. You have to learn how to overcome failure and develop trust'.

— John Parola.

OVERCOMING her great fear of heights, Options student Lisa Mann flies down the zip wire. Stepping off the 30-foot high platform and trusting the nylon wrist straps and safety belt at protection, the 100-yard long zip wire is instrumental in the building of self-esteem for Ropes course participants. Once on the ground a shaken Mann stated that while she probably would never do it again, she was glad she had taken the plunge and had the experience. (Sawtelle)

DEXTER - Grudgingly scuffling along a winding carpet of orange pine needles on the shore of Echo Lake near the Belgrade chain, six students from the SAD 46 Alternative Education school, Options, began tentative explorations of the nooks and crannies of Camp Winnebago during a recent field trip. There was a tangible tenseness to the group. As habit, each participant of the day's events exhibits an untouchable independence both craved and feared by teenagers. They are given to keeping their distance from others. In these new surroundings, however, the group moved cohesively, carefully testing unwritten limits of trip leaders then reassembling to compare notes; pointing out curious aspects of the camp, cynically at first, then with growing interest.

Isolating themselves in the last six seats of an SAD 46 bus, away from a group of enthusiastic advisors and adults who out numbered them, the students rode to the closed summer boys' camp in Fayette to take part in the Ropes of Winnebago program under guidance of John Parola, athletic director of Dexter Primary/Middle School and part owner of the facility. "Ropes" features a system of activities that test and expand physical and psychological boundaries of individuals as well as abilities to rely on others.

"The challenge comes from inside," explained Parola. "The first thing is to see what you can do personally. You have to trust the people (in the group) who can help and trust the equipment. You have to start to learn about yourself."

Louis Morong, an Options student discussing the Ropes program, described anticipation and fear faced by the group in attending the day-long activity. "We were definitely scared," he stated during a lunch break. "It's not the actual physical thing. It's that you're afraid the other people are going ahead and you're going to be left behind..."

Ropes programs, boasting activity stations both on the ground and 40 feet in the air, have been used to teach the value of cooperation to groups throughout New England, from Boston executives to non-traditional students at the University of Maine. The course demands performance of such tasks as removing a tire from a 20-foot tall pole using nothing but participants' bodies; walking across an approximately 30-foot Space Walk of 10, garden hose-covered cable loops, hung at varying heights and intervals; climbing a 30-foot high cable bridge and hurling down a 100-yard zip wire while suspended from two nylon wrist straps or rappelling off a 40-foot high platform. In the face of those challenges the fear of being left behind is a valid one.

Students attending the Options school are used to feeling left behind and being labeled as a result. Most of the students have been confronting labels in different ways all their lives as they struggle to keep up with daily life or simply make sense of public school bureaucracy. Alternative education students are usually not the star high school quarterback, Student Council or Key Club president, or head cheerleader. Most students attending alternative education were otherwise bound for dropping out. They have been tagged "at risk students", wrestling with extreme emotional stress contributed to by family background and social perception. Many call themselves "burnouts" because they have been taught that a label means identity. The goal is to just be someone, even if the image is a negative one. Being a problem is better than being ignored. Being anything is better than being nothing.

"At risk" students are classified as frequently truant, skipping classes and rebelling against authority with social maturity levels ranging from below normal to advanced. Generally the students have been shunned, isolated and alienated by their peer group, contributing to low self-esteem and little or no participation in extra-curricular activities, according to research information. Afraid of failure, afraid of falling behind, the troubled teenagers shrink further and further away from the mainstream as society demands they justify their existence.

The Ropes course, according to Parola, emphasizes self-esteem and the need for cooperation to accomplish a set goal. It stresses the effects of hap-hazard planning when individual factions break away from the group and act independently toward the objective. At the same time the program points out that there is no disgrace in failure.

"Failure is part of life. You have to learn how to overcome failure and develop trust," Parola told students. The lessons learned, he explained, can be translated into everyday life in the classroom, marriage and family.

Developing trust means facing fear for most people. Fear of being let down. Fear of being run down. Parola explained to students that trust is not gained in a single day of work after a lifetime of conditioning, but steps can be taken in that direction through meeting physical fears, such as that of heights. He told the gathering adaptation of fear conquering techniques learned at Ropes can be used in other facets of life.

Ropes cheerfully provides a controlled opportunity for participants to face their fears with a cable bridge reminiscent of a circus tight rope act. Safty harnesses fastened, feet placed firmly on the lower, hose covered cable and white-knuckle grips on the overhead guide, students and adults alike tried to recall Parola's pre-activity pep talk as they scaled 30 feet above terra firma and supporters cheered encouragement from below: "The first two steps down low are just the same as the last two up high," Parola assured the group. "To succeed you have to overcome fear itself. The problem with most of us is that we're afraid to face up to things we're afraid of. In that case it's easier when we put our trust in others."

Small scale trust activities during the morning session included the Flying Carpet and Trustfall exercises in which one member allows himself to be bodily carried or caught from a fall by the remainder of the group. Strains of isolation present on the bus snapped as students and adults worked together to accomplish the brief goals of the morning, including the intense Giant Ringfinger tire station which involved every person in the 15-member group. After a half-hour and two unsuccessful attempts to raise the tire off the pole, a brain storming session resolved the problem, leading to the exercise's acrobatic conclusion and resounding applause and rebel yells of triumph through the quiet woods. Students and adults began to see each other as equals working toward a common goal.

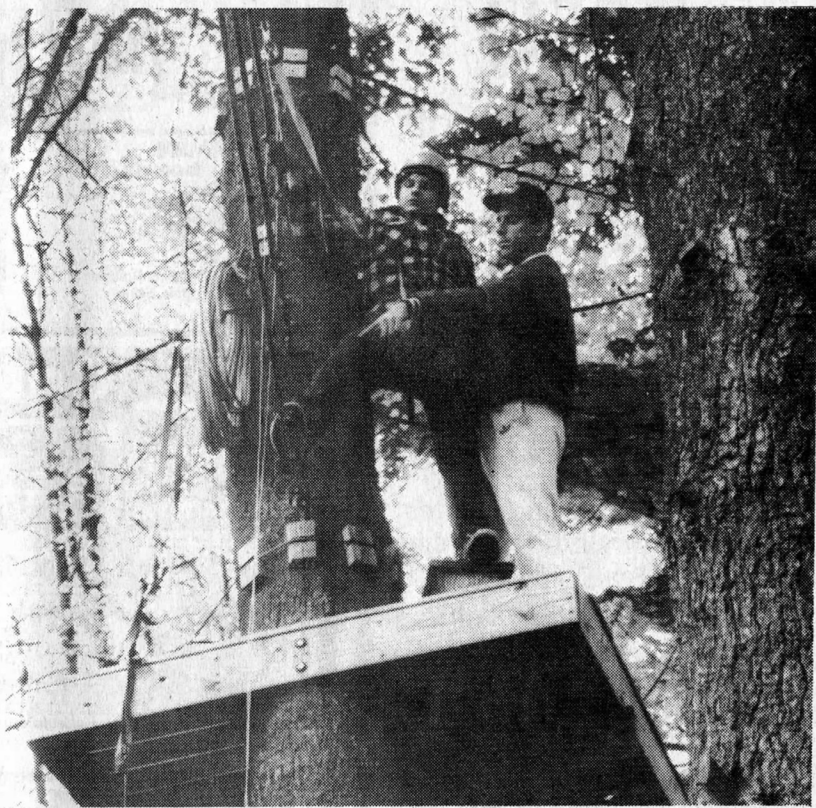
Students agreed they were glad for having participated in the program.

"It was better than I thought it would be," explained Lisa Mann. "It was more challenging."

"Working as a group was the most challenging part for me," stated Jarrod Jette, who emerged as a group leader during the program. "It taught me that if you've got a problem maybe someone else can help you to work it out. Usually if someone shows you how to do (something) the first time it's easy after that."

By day's end tired muscles and tired nerves began to work against the group as the negative attitudes and focus on personal limitations earlier abandoned by the group returned, although with less venom. Teenage bickering sounding from the last six seats on the bus replaced the words of encouragement endowed on each other through the day. Mounting the bus with a sigh, Parola was nonetheless pleased with the program's outcome. "At least we made some gains," he stated.

Alternative Education teacher Katherine Thompson agreed that the experience had been a good one for students at Options. "I'm glad that we all went and I'm pleased about the outcome. The kids learned that they could work together after all." Thompson is hopeful students in her program will be able to participate in the program again later this year or again next fall. "I think it's worthwhile," she stated.



SHARING the keys to a successful trip, Alex Guiski (right) points out ways for David Bell to approach crossing the Hourglass Bridge, a cat's cradle of cables connecting the 30-foot high zip wire platform to the 40-foot high rappelling platform. Guiski works as a summer counselor at Camp Winnebago and assisted Ropes Instructor John Parola with activities, Oct. 5. The majority of Options students and adults made the trek up a hose covered cable bridge to either use the zip wire, rappel or both. (Sawtelle)

Photos and text
by Kimberly Sawtelle

