

Parkdale Pilot Project: Hitting the slopes with *Chill*

By Laura McAndrew

“I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand”. (Chinese Proverb)

What do you get, when you take six ‘at risk’ inner-city youth who are all on probation (or some form of community service order) and stick them on a snowboard and ride the slopes with their probation officer? Sounds like a joke right....

Well it’s not.

Chill is an amazing program run primarily by Burton Snowboards, one of the top snowboarding companies in the world, whose sole purpose is to provide the chance for disadvantaged kids to try their hand at learning how to snowboard in a positive and safe environment. Through this program, youth learn not just how to snowboard, but they also discover their talents and develop their overall self-awareness and self esteem.

As the snowboarding company Burton so eloquently states on their website:

Chill changes kids.

Chill empowers kids.

Chill cares for these kids and makes them feel important.

Chill challenges kids.

Chill provides a window into a world that they would never otherwise see.

Chill gives these kids a chance to earn the confidence that goes along with overcoming obstacles. They leave the program as winners - as success stories – often for the first time in their young lives.

And that it did....

Through contacts made with the Toronto Police I had the opportunity to meet with the co-ordinator of the Chill program, Jenn Davis, and discuss how the program would benefit youth on probation. It was essentially a “no-brainer”. The youth who come across our probation offices are disadvantaged, almost always out of school, disconnected with society and, essentially, without any support systems in place. Recreational programs that ties outdoor activities with the teachings of social values in a positive learning environment makes a program like Chill extremely beneficial to youths who are looking for answers. It challenges them, it tests them, it makes them associate with other people outside of their neighbourhoods. It’s a chance for them to escape their cubicle we like to call “PARKDALE” and look at what’s beyond it.

For six weeks, I, along with six of my clients, boarded a busload full of students, various clients with the Children’s Aid Society, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and members of boys and girls clubs across Toronto, and treked to Snow Valley in Barrie. As an avid snowboarder myself, this was not new to me; the feeling of the outdoors, the relaxing calm and quiet of the snow falling on trees and the rush you get from ripping up

the slopes. What made these moments special was the chance to share them with youth who were experiencing this for the first time! All equipment, clothing, transportation, lessons and snacks were provided for free, with the assistance of Burton, Snow Valley and a number of other sponsors who are listed on Burton's website.

My group, through the assistance of an instructor and myself, learned how to stop, fall (a lot), go up a chairlift, carve, do jumps and essentially board. They were so thankful for the opportunity that on the first day, they went up on their own to the director of the program (Jenn Davis) to thank her for putting this program together and allowing them the opportunity to experience it for themselves.

Each of the five weeks covered a theme; some of which included "patience", "strength", and "courage". In each of these weeks, each one of my clients proved to others and themselves that they too possessed these essential characteristics. They also became positive role models for some of the younger kids who were on our trip. They talked to them, helped them with their equipment and even gave them lectures on issues around behaviour, attitude and respect.

Most importantly, I got to connect with my clients. I can't count the number of conversations we had either on the bus ride there, riding up the chairlift or on the slopes where we discussed what we normally would talk about in my office including their home life, ongoing perils of life and issues around their future goals. There was a mutual respect between us; me a probation officer (we are human you know) who loved to board and them, struggling kids trying to survive. The connections made on these trips are irreplaceable. (I even stood up and rapped on the bus ... albeit not one of my brightest moments).

Essentially, getting youth to participate in programs such as this offers them a different venue to learn things we essentially take for granted including being on time, being held responsible for others, working together as a team and learning to socialize with others. Furthermore, it connects professionals and their clients on a much more genuine working level.

Make sure you are aware of innovative community programs in your area and take advantage of what they may offer to your clients and, to yourself on a professional and personal level.

"Adventure education involves personal development through participation in challenging activities where the perceived outcome is unknown to the participant. Participants often develop new skills, recognize personal strengths and limitations, and develop compassion and service to others." [Yerkes, 1992]