



The academy, about 25 miles east of Prineville

Submitted photo

## About the school: A multistep process

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PRINEVILLE — Mount Bachelor Academy doesn't sound like a regular high school.

There are no slamming locker doors, no large yellow buses leaving the parking lot.

The only sound on a weekday morning is from a small stream that cuts through campus, in the Ochoco National Forest. Inside, in what is known as the lodge, students practice the “downward dog” in yoga class.

Framed photographs decorate the boarding school walls — teenagers dressed in costumes at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, others holding orphans in a Romanian village. The students who aren't physically working are in small classrooms with names like “Einstein” and “Newton” carved in wood above the door, studying math, physics and Spanish.

The scene belies the controversy that is swirling around the school — an investigation by the Oregon Department of Human Services for alleged mistreatment of students.

There are currently about 80 students at the school, and about the same number of employees. About 90 percent of the teenagers have a history of drug and alcohol abuse, and the average stay is 14 to 16 months, at \$6,400 per month, according to the school's executive director for the past 12 years, Sharon Bitz.

During the weekdays, lights out is at 9:30 p.m. And the students have meetings starting at 7:50 a.m. They stay in cabins that sleep five. The girls' dorm “Sierra” is decorated with magazine pictures of Johnny Depp, and Edward from the vampire movie “Twilight.”

The room could be a college freshman dorm, except for a few details, such as the warming hut outside where a staffer stays throughout the night, checking on the students every 20 minutes, or the contract students must sign — no sex between couples, no drugs (including tobacco) on campus and no violence.

Because of student confidentiality, Bitz declined to allow students to speak with The Bulletin during a recent tour.

## *The curriculum*

Part of the school's therapeutic curriculum is a program called Lifesteps — currently on hold pending the outcome of the DHS investigation. A student told *The Bulletin* recently she was made to dress up in a French maid costume and give the males in her class lap dances. Bitz said the girl who was making the claims was not a credible source.

There are six Lifesteps, the director said.

“The idea is that on their way to adulthood, young people transition through certain phases,” Bitz said. “And when things happen along the way, a trauma ... a major loss, the difficulty of life, someone can get arrested at one of the stages,” she said. “It's to assist a young person to go back through the stages and progress.”

The first step, “bridge,” is learning about friendship and about how to build secure relationships and maintain them. The second step, “forever young,” is focused on the past and thinking about the good qualities the students possessed as children. Step three is “promise,” focused on current responsibility for life and accountability. Step four happens after students have been in the program for about a year. Called “venture,” this is where students often role-play.

“In this step, you're looking at the heart-brain connection and what you're thinking versus what you're feeling,” Bitz said.

Bitz said the students choose their costumes. And, she said, if they alter them to make them inappropriate, they would be directed to change.

“It's designed to help a student be aware and reflective of their behavior, and encourage them to change it,” she said, “and to see the positives they may doubt in themselves.”

Bitz said there is a French maid costume, but it's not racy. Other costumes include those from the “*The Wizard of Oz*” and a King Arthur outfit.

“One of the questions raised was about a swimming suit. There is one role that involves a swimming suit, and it's the role of Miss America,” Bitz said. “It's totally positive. The swimsuit is modest: one piece, with a tiara, sash, heels. ... If someone can stand up with poise and read an acceptance speech for the high honor of outstanding woman that is bringing positive change to the world and own that role ... then maybe they can be reflective of their own positive attitudes and ... how excellent they really are.”

The fifth step is “*La Mancha*,” where the teenagers go to Poland and Romania for two weeks and do service work.

The final workshop, “*Veritas*,” is with the teenager's parents and happens near the end of the student's tenure.

“It's the culmination of their process here,” Bitz said.

### *The community*

Former Crook County Judge Scott Cooper said the school has a good reputation in the community.

“I have been on the community relations advisory board in the past, and they gave me direct access,” Cooper said. “Every time I talked to the kids, they have amazing stories to tell about what the academy has done for them. I think it’s easy to forget that the kids that go to the Mount Bachelor Academy aren’t kids that have responded to conventional therapies. And so the way they do things is different.”

Arlyce Perkins, a volunteer coordinator with the Crook County Parks and Recreation District, said she’s worked with the students planting flowers and cleaning up some public parks.

“They have been very helpful and fun to work with,” she said of the students. “The kids are interesting, and the instructors are good to work with. We’ve had no problems.”

Sgt. Travis Jurgens, with the Crook County Sheriff’s Office, said he probably wouldn’t know about the school if it weren’t for his job.

In 2008, the Sheriff’s Office had 10 separate reports of runaways from the school. In 2007, there were seven reports of runaways, one that included a group of six teenagers that burglarized homes in Prineville and stole a car. Between 2004 and 2006, there were at least 16 reports of runaways coming from the school.

“We’re not up there every day, or every week,” Jurgens said. “But we’re up there.”

Bitz said it’s important to note the school’s long-standing reputation.

“In almost 21 years, we’ve helped over 2,000 families,” she said. “Overwhelmingly, our track record is great.”

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