

[SUWS Adolescent Program](#)

South Central Idaho

888.879.7897

Visit by Dore Frances, M.A., [Horizon Family Solutions, LLC](#)

Adolescent Groups – 14 to 17

Youth Groups – 11 to 13

SUWS is located in the high desert of southern Idaho. Spring was definitely settling in on the high desert when I arrived at SUWS on Tuesday afternoon. The air was warm and there was a wind blowing that kept me from getting too hot. I was met by Kathy Rex, Executive Director, who spent most of the afternoon with me, visiting with staff and teens in two of the three groups at SUWS's program. Kathy answered every question without hesitation, as did all the staff I met that day. I spent time with the girls group doing a therapeutic exercise and had an adventure with the boys group that had just finished their search-and-rescue training. In this phase of training the boys were learning how to be of service to others.

Kathy Rex and Cliff Stockton, the Program Director, convinced me to give the boys a chance to use their skills during a simulated rescue mission. I did not want to mislead the kids, yet I did want to see them in action. I play-acted twisting my ankle. When the group answered the call, they went into action. They took my health history, blood pressure, pulse, and moved me into the shade. They wouldn't let me walk up the hill to the shade on my own so two boys helped me hop up the hill to a mat they had set out. Rather than having them carry me all the way to the road for more medical treatment, Cliff "rescued" me by informing everyone, "Dore is okay."

They boys were in good sports about the "sim," and probably as relieved as I was that I didn't need to be carried. They told me of the positive impact the program has had on them, and answered my questions openly and willingly. They all seemed to think it was worthwhile that they were at the program, and knew that many were unwilling to make the decision on their own to participate. Some shared that they had to be escorted and understood the need.

I found each group well-organized and supervised. This was my third visit to SUWS of Idaho.

The first visit was in October 2001 when I was invited to camp out and experience firsthand the nature of the program as the children experienced it, including the high ropes course.

I wanted to be able to reassure parents that yes, even in October, we were all warm and all basic needs were being met.

The second time was for the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary where almost 100 people attended the celebration. That was in June 2006. I had the pleasure of meeting the three founders at that time - George Church, LJ Mitchell, and Larry Dean Olsen.

My first professional experience with SUWS happened in 2002, when I recommended a resistant student. It worked perfectly.

Today, using wilderness programs as a preliminary to a Residential Boarding School Program is a very common practice. Over the years I have had several students with SUWS.

The SUWS base facility operates year-round in a wilderness environment. The SUWS treatment program team is comprised of a Licensed Clinical Psychologist; Clinical Director; Field Supervisors/Therapists; Field Instructors. Two field instructors live and work with the students. Prior to each course they undergo training in behavior management, first aid, outdoor skills, and therapeutic processes.

Each team of instructors is equipped with two-way radios, allowing for communication with on-call Field Supervisors/Therapists and safety response personnel 24 hours a day.

Instructors monitor the safety and welfare of the group and plan and teach day-to-day activities.

While enrolled in the 4 to 9 week program, children may hike in an area of several hundred acres, and the program has available to it several miles of territory.

One of the first things SUWS does is to help each child to understand the difference between their needs and wants. They get everything they need, and almost nothing they want.

In this environment children can't manipulate. (Not to say they don't do their best!) Within a few days, they not only begin to differentiate their needs from their wants, they also begin to realize that they haven't been paying enough attention to meeting their own needs.

SUWS begins with specific outcomes in mind. When an application is received, it is reviewed by several staff to determine the appropriateness of the student for the program, and to ascertain if the desired outcomes are achievable and how much time may be needed. By pinpointing the presenting concerns and establishing agreed upon outcomes, it is possible to develop an initial therapeutic direction and focus right from day one. Because of the limited time they have to work with students, SUWS is designed for intensity. Each day is highly structured, and each activity is related to personal objectives. SUWS uses curriculum, the desert, the elements, weather, and skill to motivate students to look into themselves and reevaluate their responsibility to self and family while asking them to understand their own personal "mission."

The unfamiliar, emotionally and physically demanding environment of the wilderness is crucial to eliciting responses from students. The SUWS program uses relationships rather than confrontation to have an impact on the students.

That evening, in the town of Gooding, I had a nice Mexican food dinner with Kathy Rex – Executive Director, Jeff Derry - Clinical Director, Mark Ellis – Field Supervisor and Jerrie Dee Harvery – Field Supervisor.

I then returned to where I had stayed before – The Gooding Hotel Bed and Breakfast, founded in 1906 and beautifully decorated.

My return visit reminded me once again that the SUWS Program can indeed provide a high impact intervention.

Not only can it help get the adolescent's attention, it can also provide the opportunity for enhanced self-esteem and insight.

That sense of accomplishment is truly deserved for every child!