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THE BIG SKY

'High-risk' kids geared up for adventure

By **JESSICA MAYRER**
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Volunteer Matt Menge looked a goofy-footed teenager up and down and reached for a suitable red-and-black snowboard Saturday as the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project kicked off its winter program.

The project, which teaches "high-risk" kids to navigate life's challenges through adventure and volunteerism, was set to give away \$120,000 worth of donated snow gear and ski-lift tickets this weekend.

"I was stoked," said 13-year-old Michael Barday of learning he got into the free program.

Of 125 applicants, BYEP accepted 48 teens for this season. Applicants are evaluated on a number of "risk factors," which range from socioeconomic status to alcohol and drug use, problems with the law, challenges in school and family issues.

"The more of the risk factors you have present in your life, the more likely it is you're going to get in trouble," said Pete MacFadyen, BYEP executive director. "We've got kids in this room that have moved 18 times. They're 14 years old.

"We see, obviously, from our 125 applications, that there is plenty of need," he said.

The goal is to help balance out those risk factors in a kids' life. The program uses outdoor recreation opportunities these teens might not otherwise have and community service to teach teamwork, trust,

communication, conflict resolution and community stewardship.

Michael, who applied on his own, without his mom's help, she said, was all smiles as he got fitted with his new gear.

If she wasn't in the program, 14-year-old Ashley Bergstrand said she probably would have been at home Saturday, watching TV. Instead, she was psyched to go snowboarding.

"I'm so excited," she said. "Everybody I tell, they're pretty jealous of me."

All 48 students accepted into the winter session were given a snowboard and lift tickets to ski at Big Sky Resort. If the kids attend all BYEP meetings, and follow through on their volunteer obligations — cleaning up trash around town or helping out at the food bank, for example — they get to keep all of the snowboarding gear.

The \$50,000 worth of gear and \$70,000 worth of lift tickets were all donated. Big Sky Resort has supported BYEP for eight years, MacFadyen said. "Without them, it doesn't happen."

It also doesn't happen without the volunteers.

Mentoring slots, in which adult volunteers donate 120 hours over a 12-week period, are in high demand, MacFadyen said. Of the 84 people who applied this season, 24 were accepted, including four BYEP graduates.

"I kind of fell in love with the program," said Margaret Coyle, who is doing her second season as a BYEP mentor.

The mentors are enormously helpful, Ashley said, because they have faced many of the same challenges in



Patrick Hoffman, a teacher at Bozeman High School, helps Toree Knoke, a member of the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project, get outfitted with a new snowboard Saturday.

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their lives that she now faces. Their nonjudgmental communication style makes talking easy.

She participated in the summer course, too, and the mentors encouraged her to push beyond her fears.

"The ropes course was really hard, because I'm afraid of heights," Bergstrand said. But she made it through. "Everybody was telling me I could do it."

"It's a good way to spend the summer instead of sitting on your butt," she said.

Down the line, she hopes to mentor other teens through the empowerment project.

That's how it works when teens learn how important it is to give back to the community, MacFadyen said.

"It's all about tying everything together," he said.

To take things to the next level, BYEP organizers are looking toward creating a nonprofit retail arm so teens can get experience working and

running a business. MacFadyen said he envisions a coffee kiosk or snowboard shop.

At first the teens would work with the public or learn a trade. Over time, they might move up to management or help with marketing. Along the way, he hopes to teach them to write a resume and balance a checkbook, he said.

"That is something we'd love to incorporate in the future," said program director Dave Granger. "It's a good way to keep them busy, out of trouble."

And as the kids see that there is a larger community willing to support them, chances are they will work toward building a healthy environment for others, MacFadyen said.

"Somebody cares about them somewhere, whether they know about it or not," he said.

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