

THE BIG SKY

SUNDAY, AUGUST 10, 2008

CITY



ALTON STRUPP/CHRONICLE

R.J. Iverson, left, and Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project mentor Jonathan Price, watch as Austin Reed leaps over the creek at Kirk Park during a community clean-up hosted by the project. "The kids came up with the whole plan — where we would go pick-up and how we'd get there," Price said.

At-risk youth pitch in

By JESSICA MAYRER
Chronicle Staff Writer

Three teens and two mentors picked up gum wrappers, beer bottles, a windshield wiper and an assortment of trash Saturday morning at Bozeman's BMX Park, as part of The Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project's first community-service weekend.

Austin Reed, 14, said the program helps him meet new people. "And not worry about home stuff."

BSYEP aims to get high-risk teens outside and active. While this weekend the youngsters are concentrating on community service projects, most of the group's activities — including rafting, fishing, snowboarding and rock climbing — are geared to be fun and teach teens trust, said mentor Jonathan Rice.

"I think the earlier you can give them

something they're passionate about and that they can believe in, the better they'll be in the long run," Rice said.

Volunteers walked in a field of crab-grass and dandelions, filling black plastic garbage bags while dodging mud puddles at the BMX Park. They also took occasional breaks, catching air from atop bicycles off the park's dirt mounds.

R.J. Iverson, 14, said his probation officer suggested he get involved. "It's fun to get away from my house," he said.

Two additional groups of teens spread out across Bozeman on Saturday as part of a two-day effort, helping out at the Heart of the Valley Animal Shelter and with Habitat for Humanity. The BMX-Park crew also tied up the Bozeman Skate Park. Additional teams will be working other projects today.

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To join the BSYEP, teens must be identified as high-risk, said program director Dave Granger. Generally, school counselors and administrators select students who might benefit. From there, the teens apply and are interviewed.

"We have far more applications than we can serve," Granger said. "So the kids need to show enthusiasm."

The project started in 2002, with five kids and five mentors. Today, nearly 40 mentors serve nearly 80 kids.

Rice, 23, remembers growing up in small-town Montana. It's important to get teens outside and active, he said.

"I remember how hard it was," he said. "Everything they do here worked for me."

And Andreas Ponti, a 23-year-old mentor helping at the park Saturday said he gets as much out of the program as the teens do.

"You learn a lot about yourself working with these kids," Ponti said. "You walk out of here a changed person."

Reed said he is learning that community service is cool. He plans on doing more volunteer work, he said.

"You're able to go out and be responsible for your community."

Josh Ewing, a big kid with wide, white laces through black tennis shoes, said his mom suggested he join the project. In addition to volunteering, he rode a Diamond-back Viper at the BMX Park.

"I got into trouble in the past with the law, a little bit. And it's to keep me out of trouble," Ewing said.

Because many of the teens in the program live with instability, nearly 30 percent don't finish the program, Granger said.

"The variables for these guys are so big," he said.

The program is free for teens and their families. Funding comes through private donations and grants, Granger said.

Teens snowboard and ski with lift tickets donated by Bridger Bowl and Big Sky Resort during the winter. And local snowboard and ski shops donate tons of gear for each kid, Granger said. At the end of the season, they keep the gear.

On Monday, the empowerment project held a Kids Classic Golf Event fundraiser at the Riverside Country Club. Granger said they hauled in about \$35,000 in donations.

"The support from the community is vast," he said. That's what the community outreach weekend is all about.

"It's to give back to the community, because the community is largely responsible for the financial support that makes it happen," he said. "It's super cool."

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