



RECOVERY SUPPORT SPECIALIST: WHAT WE DO AND HOW WE DO IT

The Phoenix Outdoor program at SUWS of the Carolinas has added Recovery Support Specialist, James Skelton, to its integrated model of substance use/abuse intervention. At SUWS, the wilderness is the forefront of treatment and the 12-step structure is infused into the daily activities of its students. 12-step exposure puts many tools in a student's toolbox along with motivational enhancement, cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, neuro- feedback and supplemental activities such as equine assisted therapy, yoga, mindfulness and meditation practices.

Recovery Support provides a guide for translating daily wilderness skills at SUWS into a 12-step recovery process so that when they leave the program, students have already been forming the habits of a 12-step lifestyle. By addressing the concepts embedded in the 12-steps through didactic instruction, time for reflection, opportunities to translate the steps into physical activity, and coaching of daily habits, James fosters a culture of support, positivity and vulnerability among students in the Phoenix program. Ultimately, students are given the opportunity to practice the 12-steps and how they will be implemented outside of SUWS so they can envision how they can take the steps and run with them! Throughout this process, James and other staff provide guidance and help students see a solution to their internal and external struggles through the framework of the 12-step program. James finds that students in the Phoenix program are easily able to attach meaning to the activities and structure they encounter, which enables them to use those metaphors as powerful tools of introspection and guidance.

When considering the 12-steps, steps 1 through 3 emphasize **SELF-ACCEPTANCE** and the decision to take action for self. This occurs for a Phoenix student through acceptance of being in an unfamiliar environment, personal contemplation and reflection in a tranquil environment, and journaling. Students are accepted into the Phoenix culture by other members of the group and staff that help minimize feelings of loss that may be experienced upon arrival. Steps 4 through 9 in the 12-step tradition relate to **COURAGE**. One faces the causes and conditions of using substances and recognizes resulting negative behaviors. For the Phoenix student, he learns "hard" wilderness skills such as making fire, building traps and hiking. He deals with the difficult emotions that arise during these tasks (e.g. frustration, anger, sadness), comes to terms with his past, makes amends, takes ownership of his behaviors, and character development begins. He becomes a member of his community and group. Steps 10 through 12 incorporate **WISDOM**. Here one starts to incorporate habits developed and prepares for how they will be carried to outside lives. The 12-step principle of Giving Back is a focus. The Phoenix student is becoming a leader of his group, is mentoring new members of the community, and is facilitating evening meetings and daily activities with field instructors. He continues to build character and focuses on service to others.

Phoenix students celebrate milestones of sobriety through ceremony including their graduation from the program. At this point the groundwork has been laid by building familiarity with the principles of the 12-step model, its language and traditions. Students will carry these skills to support their own self-efficacy and to sustain recovery.