



RITE OF PASSAGE

Sierra Ridge Academy

Newsletter

Fall 2008

Improving the lives of youth

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Field of Dreams

The newest development project at Sierra Ridge Academy is near completion with the addition of expanded onsite parking, two new outdoor basketball courts, a facelift to all site-interior pavement, and an endurance course. SRA is now in the process of completing the final phases in what is the most significant portion of the project—a state-of-the-art sports complex and a playing field. The entire project involved breaking through nearly 16 acres of dirt and other materials in order to flatten what used to be a mountain top. The removal of

throughout site can only act as an aid in ensuring positive behavior among our students.”



For years, SRA has worked around a s u b s t a n d a r d playing field that had been the victim of excessive use, improper irrigation, and s u b s t a n t i a l erosion. The new

complex will be a vast improvement and is a highly anticipated expansion for SRA. The final steps of the process include installation of an irrigation system and seeding the soil in time for the rainy season (which will allow for germination during off-use months). The irrigation system will be controlled by satellite readings of soil saturation levels and ground and air temperature. This state-of-the-art technology will ensure the best quality surface, year round. During on-site athletic events, there will be seating areas for visitors—a first for SRA outdoor sports—and there also will be recreational seating and a picnic area.



six thousand cubic yards of dirt and other materials has given way to a level surface that soon will become the sports complex and playing field.

Block-R Student-Athlete Alfredo F. also commented on the new basketball courts, stating, “I have been here over a year and I see this construction as a major improvement for Sierra Ridge. The courts provide us with a large open space for basketball and other athletics, teambuilding activities, weekend activities... the possibilities are huge.” Staff and students alike look forward to fully utilizing the athletic field and sports complex in the coming months.

Since the completion of the paving, the new basketball courts have become the center of attention for SRA staff and students. Coaches have been formulating strategies for the upcoming basketball season and reserving practice times; crafty students have recognized the possibility of installing volleyball/tennis courts on the surface and are petitioning the Program Director to ensure that their plans will be heard; each night, the courts are being used for intramural basketball among the Community Club Vocational Program; and every morning, the courts are being utilized for site-wide physical fitness. “This presents a great opportunity for staff and students alike to observe group dynamics of the whole site and discourage stratification between units,” stated Unit Manager Robert Watson. “Utilizing the new sports complex to unify dormitories and show consistency



The cross country team came out of nowhere and won the Division V San Joaquin Section Championship.

Program News

From the Desk of...

Stephen Isbell

Director of Student Services,
Sierra Ridge Academy

SRA recently implemented a monthly Conflict/Gang Intervention Group mediated by ROP staff and guest facilitator, Ignacio "Nacho" Pizano.



Nacho was incarcerated with no hope; he "did time" in two Youth Authority (YA) institutions and three state prisons, but he turned his life around. He recently celebrated twenty years since receiving an honorable discharge from the California Youth Authority and several years ago he was granted a Certificate of Rehabilitation from the San Joaquin County Superior Court. At his court date, he was the only applicant out of nine to receive the honor. Certificates of Rehabilitation are typically granted to individuals who consistently display citizen-like behavior after incarceration. For 7 years, he's operated a non-profit basketball league for "at risk kids" while raising his own family which includes two successful teenage boys.

He believes that crime is not a necessity but a matter of choice and he's proven it by supporting his family legitimately through economic difficulties. His challenge to the young men at Rite of Passage is one of responsibility, stating that "it's a matter of decision and will. Change in behavior is a personal choice ... you need to *step up to the plate* and offer no excuses for avoiding your responsibility."

In meeting with these young men at SRA, he says that there's more in life for those who are willing to invest effort and determination. He states that "if I knew there were other choices in life for me, I would've made them. I am here to tell you there is a better life. I had no models and no examples of how to live life differently... no one to give me advice. I believe my life has been saved for one reason and that's to be able to tell you that things can be different."



Students walk along the beach at Monterey Bay.

Sierra Ridge Encourages Military Enlistment

A major component of the success Rite of Passage has, is the assurance that every student leaving the program is either enrolled, employed, or enlisted. Numerous studies have shown that recidivism rates among juvenile offenders are greatly diminished when the student enters another structured environment such as college, trade school, or the military.

Sierra Ridge Academy staff has worked on one aspect regarding exit plans for their students—to develop strong relationships with local military recruiters. Military enlistment has always been encouraged, but in the last year, they've begun to invite the recruiters onto campus to work with the kids. As a result, the recruiters regularly visit the campus to interview prospects, schedule tests, and transport students to enlistment centers. In 2008, SRA celebrated when two students completed boot camp. Additionally, three others are anxiously awaiting an



enlistment date, while five more are in the process of meeting the stringent, present day requirements of our military.

Daniel L. is one of the three student athletes currently waiting for his enlistment date with the US Army. "I really don't want to go back to my neighborhood and have learned that it's better for me to avoid the people I used to hang out with. The staff at ROP have helped me a lot with getting ready for the ASVAB test, making sure I get to the recruiter and making good decisions."

Validation/Graduation Field Trip to Monterey Bay

At SRA, we believe it's important to recognize when our students meet their education goals because many of them haven't had the opportunity for success, let alone recognition or reward for their achievements. Students earn accolades such as Student of the Week and/or Month as well as more informal ones, like pizza parties and ice cream socials. When they pass the California exit exam, they receive cool stationery for letter writing and at the end of each trimester, we hold an academic award ceremony to honor their efforts.

But the greatest accomplishments a student can achieve are to complete and validate the program and/or receive their High School diploma. To commemorate these tremendous events, we take the students on field trips at the end of each trimester. Previously we've brought students to Monterey Bay, Bodega Bay, and Yosemite.

This past October, we returned to Monterey with another group. During this trip, we swam and played at Sunset Beach; visited the world famous Monterey Bay

Aquarium; walked along Cannery Row; ate pizza and watched Monday Night Football on the big screen, and camped, where we barbecued and stayed up late eating s'mores.

One student shared his sentiments about the trip by saying that he liked the beach the best



and really appreciated the break from his daily structure in the program. He also was thrilled to see a wild pig near the campsite and like many students, he had heard of the Aquarium, but had never been to it before.

It's both important and rewarding for the educators and staff to show our students that hard work, dedication, and completing of their goals really does pay off.

Community & Customer News

Color Guard Participates in Labor Day Parade



SRA students let their colors fly at the City of Marina's Labor Day Parade

A *color* is another name for the national flag, but it's also a flag symbolizing a unit, ship, or armed forces of a country. Colors have been around as long as there's been a military and their purpose traditionally has been to motivate troops and instill pride of country, unit, etc...

during battle. For obvious reasons though, the use of

colors on the actual battlefield has dramatically evolved over the years. Instead, the use of color guards can be found across the nation at a variety of venues such as state ceremonies, sporting events, and local parades.

The Sierra Ridge Academy Color Guard was recently honored to participate in the City of Marina's Labor Day Parade where they displayed the national, state, and Rite of Passage colors. In addition to performing, they had the opportunity to learn about traditional Korean

Drums and received a "hands-on" lesson about a local fire engine from the Marina Fire Department.

This wasn't the first time the color guard from SRA worked together though. The academy counts on the Color Guard to perform at many activities like validation ceremonies, home sporting events, and most of the school rallies. SRA's color guard trains diligently and works hard at making their crisp movements snap and pop.

A major reason for the students' excellence in execution is because of their instructors, many of whom are former military personnel, who've taken time out of their schedule to ensure that the color guard is the absolute best that it can possibly be. "Being involved with the color guard at SRA is an honor. I am glad that I can pass on some of the things that I learned during my duties as a United States Marine," said Eddie McCall, a unit manager at Lassen dorm.



Santa's Little Helpers



Santa's Express started in 1983 when a small group of concerned Calaveras County citizens realized the need to help low income families during the holidays. That year, they distributed five boxes of food during Thanksgiving and

Christmas. The needs of the community have greatly increased since the program's inception and this year, 650 boxes will be donated. The program doesn't receive any state or federal assistance and relies entirely on donations. There are an estimated 120 people who

volunteer during the holidays, including students and staff from Rite of Passage, who, for the past 18 years, have helped to support the families served by this program. According to Billie Westernoff, the Community Services Program Director for the Human Resources Council, Inc., "Rite of Passage... and all volunteers make this happen. Without them there would be no *Santa's Express*."



This year's RAMS had a memorable time and enjoyed working alongside the other volunteers. They spent three days packing small, medium, and large boxes, depending on the size of the family to whom it was going. When the boxes were full, the students hand delivered them to the families in need. The experience affected each student differently, but they all had a clearer understanding of the importance of giving rather than receiving. One of the RAMS said, "we all look forward to helping during Christmas. We really had a lot of fun!"





Ram-Page

Director of California Admissions, Bill Large, and Deputy Probation Officer from Kern County, Cynthia Aguirre.



The soccer team had an amazing year, they were the first team ever in SRA history to make the C.I.F. Playoffs.



The seniors of SRA take a camping trip to the coast near Monterey. For some, it was their first time seeing the ocean and for others, their first time being buried in the sand.



SRA students enjoy playing BINGO with senior citizens.



Trick Or Treat!

SRA students and staff made this year's Halloween special with costumes and a haunted house.



Let's Get Ready To Rumble!
SRA held its annual fall carnival with a wide variety of activities and treats.



Paul Dudley, No. California ROP Admissions & Linda Bui, Deputy P.O. from Alameda County, get their picture taken with SRA students.



Making His Vote Count
SRA student votes for the first time during the recent election.



Run, Ride, Swim, Survive

The first place trophy and the coveted RAMS head trophy, for the first time ever, goes to the same team. SRA students and staff celebrate after all their hard work.

Why do we do what we do? We do what we do because we want to improve the lives of youth—it's our mission. To guide Rite of Passage in its mission, it uses evidence-based practices and a cognitive-based curriculum. When a curriculum is developed for at-risk youth, the course of study also needs to be dynamic and flexible in order to address the student's specific needs and learning styles. Research indicates that program success happens when "offenders do something about their difficulties rather than just talk about them. These types of [behavioral] interventions teach offenders new, pro-social skills... through modeling, practice, increasing difficulty of the skill, and reinforcement." (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2006)

Rite of Passage provides its students with an action-oriented, cognitive-based curriculum designed to guide them toward a healthy reintegration into the community. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is evidence-based, which means that it's supported by research proving its efficacy in helping people make emotional and behavioral changes. Rite of Passage uses several evidence-based curriculums that support its students' therapeutic needs such as *Thinking for a Change*, *Active Parenting*, and *Aggression Replacement Training*.

Rite of Passage recently published, for all of its sites, the first installments of its curriculum, or RAMS manual... an acronym for Respect, Attitude, Motivation, and Spirit. It's an eight-volume (referred to as *concepts*), structured guideline that teaches students to be good citizens and functioning members not only on their school campus but in the general community as well. This article will look closely at the first four concepts which are titled *Understanding How Systems & Organizations Work*; *Creating The Future You Want*; *Using Your Strengths & Developing Resiliency*; and *Understanding How Our Internal World Affects Us*.

Concept 1: Understanding How Systems and Organizations Work. Business organizations aren't only made up of people—they also have methods, procedures, routines, techniques, structure, and practices to keep everything organized. In Concept 1, students are shown that these elements exist not only at Rite of Passage but in other organizations as well. Comparisons are drawn by teaching and having the students learn fundamentals such as norms and rules (unwritten rules of conduct and formal

directives); guided group meetings and team meetings (business or committee meetings); and student evaluations through force field analysis (employee/performance evaluations). Once the students recognize, understand, and put into practice the parallels between Rite of Passage and other organizations, they're better able to effectively participate in school, jobs, or community groups when they exit the program.

Concept 2: Creating the Future You Want. What does the future hold for us? It's an all-important question and it's difficult to foresee exactly what it holds, but, we can be the creator of our future.

We all have ambitions, aspirations, goals, and objectives. In order to accomplish these goals, regardless of size, Rite of Passage students are taught to use a definitive problem-solving system adopted from *Thinking for a Change*. The system asks the student to: stop and think; give a description to the problem; gather information to set a goal; understand what their choices are and then, the consequences of those choices; choose, plan, and do; and finally, evaluate. Whether the student works on a school project, lays out a career path, or has to deal with unwelcome news from home, they learn that this six-step problem solving system is universal.

Concept 2 also discusses surrounding one's self with people whom we admire and who inspire us. These people are *role models*—they can help in creating the future we want. Rite of Passage has many role models who encourage and succeed in involving the students with outside organizations, community events, and participation in *doing for others*. In the process, students are exposed to positive community role models who can help them along their path to success.

Concept 3: Using Your Strengths and Developing Resiliency. There are many words to describe *resiliency*, such as flexible, tough, strong, or being able to "bounce back." In Concept 3, students learn to become resilient by using their strengths. Rite of Passage believes that every student has unique strengths and character traits they can utilize to achieve their goals and overcome challenges. The curriculum at Rite of Passage teaches students to find and improve upon their strengths and positive character traits and, at the same time, develop resiliency so that challenges or failures won't prevent them from persevering in whatever endeavor they embrace. First, we identify or do an assessment, and then, there's time for self-reflection. The assessment used is the Positive

Achievement Change Tool (PACT) that identifies not only the student's *risk factors*, such as substance use, aggression, or living conditions, but also their *protective factors*, such as school status, current relationships, or employment. In her 1992 definitive follow-up study of resilient, challenged youth, Emmy Werner provides evidence showing "that risk factors are not as powerful as protective factors in predicting adult outcomes—even for extremely challenged young people."

Concept 4: Understanding How Our Internal World Influences Us. There is no question that each of us, on a daily basis, is influenced by our internal "world." Happiness is not dependent on anyone else's approval. At Rite of Passage, each student is taught that internal thoughts, feelings, and attitudes control how we act—not external stimulus like people, places, or events. In the process of changing the student's beliefs about the power of thought, the student can identify the thinking errors and the triggers that cause them to consider negative behavior. The bottom line is that triggers always are internal. They're thoughts in our head—people, places, and events that surround us, but actually have no meaning until we assign them meaning.

The curriculum focuses on how to deal with and overcome thinking errors and behavioral problems—such as anti-social peer association, anti-social personality traits, substance abuse, lack of problem-solving and self-control skills, and other factors "that are highly correlated with criminal conduct, i.e., criminogenic factors" (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006). To help students discern their triggers, Concept 4 re-introduces the "Six Problem Solving Steps," applying them to fictional characters in hypothetical situations. The stories illustrate how the characters might rethink their choices for a more favorable outcome.

Rite of Passage has been "improving the lives of youth" for the past 25 years. The new RAMS Manual supports this mission by providing a clear, definitive path for its students to walk.

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Staff Update

Employee

Jeffrey Zahniser

In September, Jeffrey Zahniser, the Food Service Manager at Sierra Ridge Academy, earned his Certified Executive Chef (CEC) designation from the American Culinary Federation (ACF), the premier professional organization for culinarians in North America with 20,000 members spanning more than 230 chapters nationwide. The ACF operates the most comprehensive certification program in the U.S. requiring candidates to display a high level of work and educational experience; pass a written and practical examination; and complete coursework in food safety, nutrition, and supervisory management.

Chef Z., as his students call him, has had a diverse career since graduating with honors from



The Culinary Institute of America. Prior to coming to Sierra Ridge Academy, Chef Z. was the executive chef at the City Hotel in Columbia, CA; owned and operated his own catering company in Los Angeles; and was executive chef for Wyndham Hotels in Southern California. He also is a Certified Culinary Educator and a Culinary Instructor at Columbia College.

Spotlight

Food Service Manager

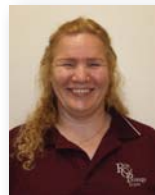
His current endeavor as a culinary instructor for disadvantaged youth has become his favorite and most rewarding experience. He has witnessed teenage boys, who everyone else had given up on, thrive in the kitchen. A testimony to this is when one of his students recently said in a speech to his peers that "Culinary Arts has saved my life!" When asked why he continues to work with the boys, Chef Z. said that he likes to be a positive role model for them and that it is fulfilling to show them another way of life. He finds that his students are able to leave their past lives behind, whether it's gang affiliation or drug use, for a positive experience learning life lessons in the kitchen.

EMPLOYEES OF THE MONTH



May

Frank Broglio (Maintenance)- Frank has spent most of his life in Northern California. He attended Chabot Jr. College in Hayward, California, and was active in the United States Navy Reserve. There, Frank worked as an E-5 and Recruiter. He now also works as a Realtor, Notary Public, and Virtual Tour Photographer, and his hobbies include hunting, fishing, camping, photography, and gold panning. If Frank had to spend the rest of his life in one isle of the supermarket, he would choose the produce isle to "stay healthy and thrive."



July

Gayla Jesus (Case Management Assistant)- Gayla has worked in Child Care since 1997 and has been with Rite of Passage since 2001. After raising 4 boys of her own, she wasn't sure if she wanted to continue working in an all-boys home. Once she started, however, it seemed to come naturally. Gayla volunteers frequently throughout Calaveras County at soup kitchens and non-profit organizations that benefit those in need, and she's a devoted mother and friend who looks forward to advancing her career in the Counseling field. If she had to only shop in one isle of the supermarket for the rest of her life, she would choose the butcher section. "I love steak," she says.



August

Fernando Arrizon (Maintenance)- Fernando is originally from Baja, California, but has lived throughout the United States including Illinois, Idaho, Florida, Nevada, and California. He attended Idaho State University and within the coming months, he will be completing his Bachelors of Science degree in Biology with a minor in Spanish. Fernando also is a certified medical translator and a hydraulics technician. He has quite a following of students here at Sierra Ridge Academy; he works as a mentor and a guide to those interested in grounds keeping and maintenance. He also remains active within the community, volunteering on his days off to help at his daughter's school and spend time with his family. When asked which isle of the supermarket he would choose, Fernando chose the "Mexican section. Although I am a US citizen, my heart belongs to Mexico. It's people, its food, its beaches, and traditions."



September

Leah Clough (Group Leader)- Leah has lived most of her life in Tuolumne County, CA. She currently attends Columbia College and is pursuing her degree in Business Management. Leah spends much of her leisure time fishing, hunting, riding dirt bikes, and camping. She has two children of her own and has worked hard to be a part of their educational experience as well. Last year alone, she raised \$60,000.00 for Tuolumne county education. Leah would like to continue to see her career advance at Rite of Passage and is waiting for the hypothetical day we expand our sites into Europe and beyond. If she could only shop in one isle of the supermarket, she would choose the deli isle, "So I could eat sandwiches all day long."



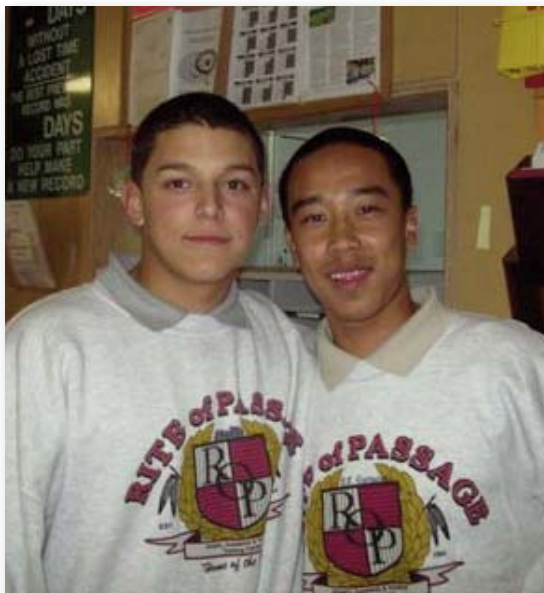
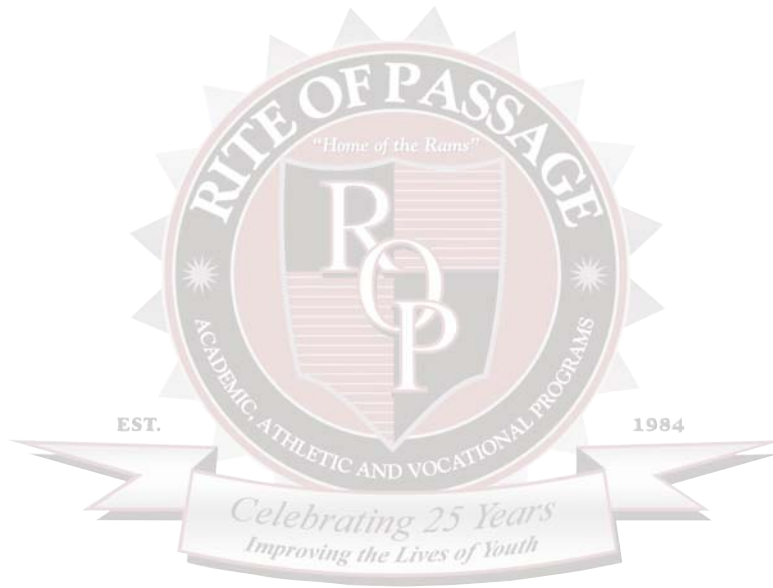
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Student-Athlete Darren S., right, is a valued member of the Sierra Ridge Academy RAMS community.

I can really see the improvement my son has made over the last few months. He takes time to really talk to us when there is some miscommunication, instead of getting mad. I can honestly say that I can see a difference in his behavior. At first I was worried about my son being far away from us but I would recommend your program to anyone who had a child that needs guidance. The staff really takes the time to help the young men change.

-John S. (Parent of Ram Darren S.)