

# The Teachable Moment

As an adventure facilitator, it's sometimes easy to forget that "experiential learning" is not only accomplished by using my treasured arsenal of adventure activities. The most teachable moments sometimes arrive in unpredictable forms, from unexpected places at the most opportune times.

The alternative school in which I work has four teams (A, B, C and D) with students grouped primarily by age from seventh through twelfth grade. Students are placed here due to a variety of severe emotional and behavioral problems. I developed a program to allow each team to experience a full day of action on our ropes challenge course knowing how that experience can change people's lives. To prepare, each team participated in four weeks of school based adventure activities. As is often the case when working with students at-risk, the groups started off on shaky ground. However, they eventually pulled together as teams, earning the required confidence and trust of staff members to be out on the ropes course. As is also often the case, the teams that had gone to the course to this point had risen to the occasion, far surpassing everyone's expectations. But then, there was Team B.

Team B had sixteen ninth grade students. Inarguably, they were the most challenging team in the school for teachers and counselors alike in

terms of emotional disturbance and both disruptive and passive behaviors. As a result, group membership during the program had been fluid as students were frequently placed out of the room for disciplinary reasons or came to school inconsistently.

Throughout most of the year, the two counselors who usually worked with this team informed me how difficult it was to engage the students in this group. From the outset in the adventure program, it was clear that getting these kids to simply "Be Here" was going to be a significant challenge.

Four weeks into our program, the group was nowhere near ready to be on the ropes course. The participation was inconsistent at best. No true positive peer leaders had emerged. Behavior was continuing to be atrocious. It was early June and the end of the school year was fast approaching. The other counselors, the two teachers and myself decided that we would give the group one last chance to show that they were ready to be on the course.

We initiated that session with a meeting in the classroom. I put my best 110% into inspiring the students with several readings from "Gold Nuggets", a book of inspirational reading for adventure facilitators published by Project Adventure. The group heard about the 100th monkey, a story of how change spreads once a critical number of people start thinking or doing things in a new, better way. I encouraged

each of them to be the 100th monkey. Then, I read about Choosing to Function and Risk and Commitment. Without risk, life is nothing. We have to choose to function and challenge ourselves to take risks or not try at all. We then asked each student, one by one, if they could commit to being a positive part of this group. As they said “yes”, they were asked to tell the group one thing they were going to do to reach the goal of getting to the challenge course. Each student did this. With hopes high, we headed outside to attempt a team building challenge called Twirlie Bull’s Eye.



[www.masternewmedia.org](http://www.masternewmedia.org)

The first round of the activity calls for group members to pair up and simply send a small helicopter-like Twirlie back and forth trying to make as many catches as possible with their partner. Before the activity even started, students were dishonoring the commitments they had made only minutes before. As a staff, we pressed on, but the students could not safely do the first step of this activity. With sadness and feelings of defeat, for the first time since I started facilitating adventure based groups nearly 8

years earlier, I had a group who failed to rise to the occasion when put to the test. We rounded up the students and headed back to the classroom, feelings of frustration, hopelessness and failure pervading.

In the classroom, an art class was wrapping up. As we entered, we all noticed that the 75-gallon fish tank that held African Ciclids, Freshwater Parrot Fish and Miniature Piranha was blue. This tank was the pride and joy of Tim, one of the Team B teachers. In a sudden flurry of chaos, it became evident that someone had dumped blue acrylic paint into the tank while our group was outside. This was the second devastating tragedy this tank had faced this year. Several months prior, during school vacation, the filters turned off following a power failure and were not turned back on. All the fish died. The school took up a collection to purchase new fish, which had brought life back to the room. Now, all of that was threatened by one heartless, cold act. Tim was devastated. He left the room without a word. The students watched, paralyzed. I pointed out the obvious to the class; unless they took immediate action, the fish were going to die. Someone had done this to their teacher, to their fish and, since it was their classroom, to them. Were they going to allow this to happen or were they going to pull together and save the fish?

After some hesitation, some of the students came forward to help out. Soon, they all were in motion. Momentum began to build and ideas were flying. In a few minutes, there

was a group getting new water into buckets. Two students found plastic bags to put fish in for a transfer to a tank down the hall. Other students initiated an action plan to get the tank cleaned out and filled with new water as quickly as possible. Everyone was pitching in. As the class responded to the crisis, all the staff members quickly realized that a better teachable moment could not have been created.

Within the span of one class period, the group had transferred the fish to buckets, followed by plastic bags that were then moved to a fish tank at the other end of the building. They had emptied the 75 gallons of water, cleaned all the filters and gravel thoroughly and refilled the tank with water carried in five-gallon containers from the kitchen down the hall. Each bottle was treated with chemicals to ensure the safety of the fish before it was dumped into the tank. The gravel and décor at the bottom was replaced, the tank filled and filters re-primed. The entire mess was cleaned up. The same students who couldn't manage to toss twirlies back and forth without plummeting into chaos accomplished all this. They had been pushed into crisis where they needed to save lives and help someone who they cared about that was truly hurting. And they rose to the occasion.

The next day, the fish were happily swimming about in their newly cleaned tank. From this twist in the teachable moment idea, the team reminded me that with flexibility and an open mind, any circumstance

could be utilized as a teachable moment. I guess this was more of a



“learnable” moment than a teachable one. I didn't teach them anything. Through their own actions, the students learned something new about themselves. They exposed a depth of character and caring they didn't even realize they possessed. They discovered that by putting aside personal differences and selfish desires, they could come together for the pursuit of a common goal and make a difference in someone's life. I learned that sometimes when things seem most hopeless, a lifeline gets tossed to you. You just have to see it.

#### About the Author

Scott I. Goldsmith, M.S., LPC has been a school-psychologist for fifteen years, the last four at Manchester Regional Academy. He also has a private therapy practice and is an adventure facilitator and team-building consultant working in Manchester, Connecticut.

	<p>Have you checked out NAREN's website lately? <a href="http://www.atriskeducation.net">www.atriskeducation.net</a></p>
--	--