

Changing Lives Outdoors

Christopher Rutgers calls himself “the original case study” for his organization, Outdoor Outreach, a local nonprofit that motivates at-risk and underprivileged kids through activities like backpacking, kayaking, rock climbing, snowboarding, and surfing.

“I came from a really abusive background,” he explains. “I was a mess as a kid. All the problems that we see in the kids we work with? I had them.”



Christopher Rutgers

When he was 18, Rutgers landed a job as a dishwasher at a ski resort in Utah. Awed by the alpine beauty around him, he learned to ski. He skied every day for half a year, in fact, and got really good at it. So good that he eventually became a competitive freestyle skier, touring the world and trying out a half-dozen other outdoor sports along the way.

“What happened for me is that I found a passion,” he says. “Something I loved to do more than anything. All day, every day, I enjoyed it. That was hugely healing for me. That, more than anything, is what we try to do for the kids — give them a place where they have joy in their lives.”

Rutgers started Outdoor Outreach a decade ago. He liked the idea of programs like Outward Bound, but

knew that the youth he wanted to help — kids at homeless shelters, in foster care, and at inner-city schools — couldn’t afford fee-based adventures.

“Ten years and 5,000 kids later, no kid has ever paid for any of our programs,” he says. The organization’s core program is Outdoor Adventure Club. Rutgers’ team goes into inner-city schools and works with the staff to determine who is falling through the cracks. Those who join up help plan group activities (a trip to Joshua Tree, or an afternoon surf lesson) and do community service projects like beach cleanups and tree plantings. Outdoor Outreach also offers vocational training and enrichment activities.

For the first time, these kids get outside and see how big the world is. They have fun. They gain confidence. And throughout the time they’re involved — Outdoor Outreach is for middle and high schoolers — they learn from positive, supportive role models, says Rutgers.

“The kids that we’re working with, they’re all trapped in these negative cycles and patterns: drugs, gangs, poverty, abuse, neglect. Everything in their environment reinforces that. We’re trying to short circuit those cycles.”

Participants who stick with the club can eventually enroll in the leadership program, which trains them to become part-time instructors at Outdoor Outreach, where they can help the next group of kids.

Outdoor Outreach, which has a small staff and some 100 volunteers, has produced incredible success stories. One example, a kid who formerly lived in a homeless shelter, graduated valedictorian of his high school and went on to attend UCSD on a Gates Millennial Scholarship.

“People who are happy and successful have passion in their lives,” says Rutgers. “If you’ve got that, everything else works out.” (619/238-5790, www.outdooroutreach.org) ANNAMARIA STEPHENS

Outdoor Outreach empowers at-risk and underprivileged youth to make positive, lasting changes in their lives through comprehensive outdoor programming. Presently, the organization’s biggest challenge is ensuring that all programs are sustainable and retain maximum impact.