

It Takes an Organic System...



Take some young people from the inner city. Place them in a natural environment that puts them to the test. The result? Changed lives. Learn more about the inspirational – and complexity-inspired – work of Chris Rutgers.

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Containing the “Social Virus”

The global HIV epidemic resists easy solutions. Today, some of the brightest thinkers in complexity are applying their energies to offer new possibilities for action... and change.

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An Emerging Consciousness



A diverse body of thinkers is coming to some common new conclusions. A coincidence? Plexus member Bruce Watluck thinks it is something more.


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Healing in Nature

How do you encourage challenge, learning, and growth for inner city young people? For this San Diego-based organization, the answer involves plunging them deep into natural systems... and applying a little complexity theory along the way.

Chris Rutgers believes that the beauty of nature, the majesty of mountains and the mystery of the ocean with its mighty eternal rhythms offer healing balm for inner city youngsters whose lives are bound by concrete, asphalt and dangerous neighborhoods.

He is also convinced that letting young people use their strength and stamina in an outdoor environment is an exciting and potent way to build confidence. Those convictions led him to form Outdoor Outreach, a San Diego-based non-profit organization dedicated to providing high quality outdoor experiences to poor or troubled youth.

“The core thing in my founding philosophy is trying to help kids with self esteem, and it is my belief that self esteem cannot be taught,” Mr. Rutgers says. “My feeling is that experiences like rock climbing, surfing, hiking and snow boarding are intrinsically powerful enough to have a huge impact on kids. I can give them this tangible, personal experience—this cliff, this wave, this hill—and the confidence will come from the experience.”

Take rock climbing: it's challenging, fun, and a little scary. A young climber may get immediate incentive to confront some deeply emotional private issues while group support is there for safety and physical success. Say a youngster sees a peer doing a 70 foot repel off a cliff. When the safety and enjoyment of this novelty become obvious, reluctance among on-lookers gives way to the joy of adventure. “Now the kid has to trust himself, his guide, and the other kids,” Mr. Rutgers says. “He has to work through all those trust issues and process them in a way that works for him, in a fun and challenging environment. We





stay out of it and let the experiences do the trick. It's amazing, because it really works."

He recalls the profound gratification he felt seeing a tough teen-ager from a homeless shelter feeling safe enough to fall asleep on the shoulder of a volunteer on the ride home from a snowboarding trip.

A New Environment

If kids from difficult environments are expected to keep a journal, join hands and have analytical discussions, they shut down and the whole experience is wasted, Mr. Rutgers adds, so it is important for staff to get out of the way and give youngsters space to absorb new thoughts and feelings on their own terms.

Mr. Rutgers thinks restricted opportunity stunts personal development. "Ninety percent of the inner-city kids we work with spend most of their lives within a five block radius of their homes. They're surrounded by drugs, gangs, prostitution, and they have mostly poor choices to make, so the cycle continues. There are kids who live 15 miles from the ocean, and they have never seen the ocean. They can't swim, and they try to drink salt water because they've never been to the ocean and they don't know anything about it," he says. "We take them to the ocean, rivers, beaches and the wilderness and let them see there is a big beautiful world out there beyond that five block radius. That can be a very empowering thing for these kids. A lot of this is about developing passion," he asserts, "and this gives the kids something to be passionate about. If you have passion in your life, everything else tends to take care of itself."

The goal is to give youngsters more than a one-time trip. Youngsters who like the program stay with it for years, developing relationships with adult staffers and volunteers, and becoming mentors for other youngsters. The program operates with a two or three-to-one youth to staff ratio, thanks to 80 to 90 dedicated volunteers from the community. Most are sports enthusiastic skilled in the activities they help run. Some 1,500 youngsters participate. Outdoor Outreach works with inner city schools, boys and girls clubs, residential facilities, homeless shelters and the juvenile justice system to reach adolescents in greatest need. The operation has always emphasized relationships, networks, and self-organization, and Mr. Rutgers has become increasingly interested in the

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complexity science principles he has long been using intuitively.

When he began the program five years ago, Mr. Rutgers worked with youngsters from privileged backgrounds, and was distressed by their blase sense of entitlement. “I started working with kids who were

supposed to be awful, and they were beautiful,” he recalls. “Now when the agencies tell me they want to make this a reward for their best kids, I tell them send me your worst. They’re the ones who really need it.”

The youngsters need good relationships with adults, and they need idealism. Mr. Rutgers says the universal question that comes from new participants isn’t about ropes or cliffs. “They want to know are you getting paid for this,” he says. “They’re used to case managers and social workers, people to whom they are a number. When the volunteers tell them they’re not getting paid, that it’s just something they love and want to share, the kids are blown away.”

Programs are tailored to many needs.

A leadership program allows mature teens who really love the activities to spend three to six months training to be instructors. Mr. Rutgers notes one of the most effective leaders is a youngster who is putting his life together after two years in jail. Another success story is a youth who had been shifted from one foster placement to another since age two because his father was in jail and his mother was homeless. Now 19, after three years in the leadership program, the young man—a natural athlete with a love for climbing—is working in construction, has earned a scholarship to another camp, and works summers as a



counselor. A structured mentoring program pairs adolescents and volunteers by their interests. If an inner city teen and a college educated accountant both love surfing, for example, they have a basis for friendship that transcends their differing lots in life.

Outdoor Adventure Clubs in an inner city high school, an afternoon program and a homeless shelter give youngsters experience with leadership, voting, finances, and running an activity. They elect their own

officers and meet once a month with an Outdoor Outreach advisor who helps them choose their trips and plan details. They help pay for expensive trips, such as snowboarding and river-rafting, with car washes and other fund-raising activities.

“The programs are created from the bottom up, and are constantly changing,” Mr. Rutgers explains. “We have an underlying structure with very strict boundaries to keep everything safe. Many of the activities are inherently risky, so we have to have very strict—but simple—safety rules. Once those are in place we have the freedom to be flexible.” For instance, he explains, the staff always has several possibilities ready, so that if the youngsters don’t like an activity, or the weather gets too cold, they are ready to shift gears and do something else.

Creativity through Self-Organization

The same flexibility applies in the larger organization. Mr. Rutgers was introduced to complexity theory through a friend at the Center for Self Organizing Leadership. “In the last year I’ve really been focused on applying some of these ideas in Outdoor Outreach,” he says. “Specifically, I want to create space within Outdoor Outreach for the community to self organize around the mission of helping at-risk and underprivileged kids through outdoor activities. And the community has stepped up. There have been some amazing results.”

The youngsters’ enthusiasm for ocean trips generated the idea for Outdoor Outreach to form a partnership and collaborate with another non-profit, the San Diego Oceans Foundation. The result has been trips with presentations that let kids observe and feel marine animals and marine environments, and that has expanded into the classroom, with an extensive marine biology curriculum available in many San Diego schools. In one kindergarten through 12th grade school for the homeless, a marine science elective is presented at several grade levels. Students learn from the foundation’s marine biologists and Outdoor Outreach field trips that include visits to an aquarium and snorkeling. Students also will be able have marine science experience by visiting hatcheries where sea bass are raised, feeding the fish, helping to keep record logs, and releasing them into the ocean.

Another example of self-organizing began when two women mountain bikers came to Mr. Rutgers with an idea for a youth program. “I don’t know anything about mountain biking, but they do, and they have the energy,” he says. “My biggest resource as an organization is the networks and relationships I’ve developed. It took me five years to develop them, and it would be a daunting task for these women to establish non-profit status, get insurance, and

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build all those relationships. Because they came to me and we made it an Outdoor Outreach program, they were immediately plugged in to a network of 30 agencies, high school principals, counselors, directors of programs, and about 2,000 kids. They rallied the San Diego Mountain Biking Association, and now they get the bikes, and run the trips, and now mountain biking is a whole separate program.”

After years of 80-hour weeks building all the connections that keep Outdoor Outreach going, Mr. Rutgers has developed a broad perspective on his field. Non-profits—including churches, hospitals and a wide array of educational and philanthropic entities—are the fourth largest industry in the country.

“We all have different functions,” he says, “but we all have the same underlying mission: to make the community better. And we do an awful job of reaching that goal. I see agencies that are in direct competition with each other, that don’t share resources, that have overlapping services, and that operate on their own little islands. There is a massive waste of resources, and there has to be a better way.”

The mountain bikers are just one example of how goals could be realized. Organizations like his—that are willing to share resources—can help people with innovative ideas put their energy and ingenuity into action. When Dr. Dawn Abriel, a physician, and Jennifer Fricschy, an acupuncturist, wanted to start Mobile Medicine, a program to serve health needs of low income and uninsured people, Mr. Rutgers was able to help. He put them in touch with network of social service agencies, and gave them discs containing the forms, logs, spreadsheets and helpful literature he gathered in his six years of experience in grant-writing.

Ideas abound. Mr. Rutgers has heard from a bi-lingual psychology graduate interested in creating an elder care program in the Latino community and people who want to develop a sailing and fishing program. A woman from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration recently submitted a grant application to NASA for a program that would incorporate astronomy into Outdoor Outreach camping programs. “The sky is the limit,” he says, adding that he would like to see



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regionally franchised umbrella organizations across the country where people with commitment and idealism can tap into the resource of networks and relationships.

For Mr. Rutgers, insights on the positive power of nature and physical activity came through personal experience. He says he was a troubled kid himself.

“When I was 18, I moved to a ski town in Utah,” he says. “I didn’t have the life skills to function in a regular job, so I started working in a ski lodge as a dish washer. Then I became a cook. I worked 40 hours a week, and skied all day. It was an amazing experience for me. It changed my life.”

Mr. Rutgers was a competitive skier, but injuries made that impossible to continue. He taught for a while, but eventually felt the way he could have real, heart-felt impact on young lives was through sharing the sort of beauty, excitement and personal growth he experienced on snow-covered mountains.

“That touches my soul,” he says. Not every kid in Outdoor Outreach will have a life-changing experience, he knows, but those who don’t will at least have an interesting memory from that cliff, that wave, or that winding trail through woods and fields. ■

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