

## **Our New Vision Wilderness Experience**

My son was diagnosed with bipolar at age 4 and PDD-NOS (autism spectrum) at age 5. Life, needless to say, was a rollercoaster of violent manic episodes, school suspensions, hospitalizations, intensive daily therapies and medications for the next 6 years. Donovan had suffered a number of significant traumatic events in his life.

He seemed to level off in middle school; all the therapies and working on mental health recovery was working. Donovan was pleasant to be around, active in the community, doing well with his academics. He still struggled with consistently making good choices, with interpersonal skills and with appropriate self advocacy. However as he matured, we saw progress.

Donovan started high school in the fall of 2008. Everyone who had worked with Donovan for the last several years had high expectations for his success. We were excited!! We'd all worked so hard to teach him the skills he needed to move forward. He had worked hard too, and believed in himself. His positive self esteem was short lived soon after beginning his freshman year.

Navigating the new environment with nearly 2000 students & several hundred staff proved daunting. It seemed building relationships with students was not the priority of staff, and is a necessity for Donovan. He suffered emotionally, academically and plummeted into depression and was despondent. As a result of incidents at school, Donovan was arrested twice and suffered legal consequences. Donovan held no hope for his future. I felt that it was in his best interests to pull him out of school in early spring of 2009. I needed to find a way to help my son rebuild himself from the inside before I lost him completely. Donovan began weekly individual 'traditional' psychotherapy in April of 2009, and it helped. But I knew from past experience that therapeutic intensity is necessary to really reach Donovan, to instill within him what was lost and to gain the skills he needed to move forward.

I had first heard of NVW a year prior at a conference when I visited their exhibitor booth at the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Children Come First Behavioral Health Conference. I took the information and thought of some of the other kids I worked with in my role as behavioral support staff who might benefit from the program. At the time I didn't know that our family would need this resource in the future.

I emailed NVW late spring of 2009 to inquire. I talked to Donovan on multiple occasions about the prospect of a 3wk wilderness camp. I had to bribe him to go; he didn't want to be away for 3wks in the summer. Now I had to raise the funds to send him. We got creative and were able to use his Children's Long Term Support Waiver dollars. There was a lot of paperwork and an hour long phone intake; NVW was thorough in obtaining historical details needed to reach Donovan to make a productive therapeutic impact with him.

Departure day: Donovan was set to go! We met the expedition counselors at a gas station on a Monday afternoon and reviewed some information. I hugged my son good bye and pulled away before the van left. That night, I had serious pangs of guilt; what had I just done? I sent my kid into the north woods for 3 weeks with strangers!! Would he be alright? How would he cope? Would he be warm & dry at night? Would he be safe? Who were the other youth going out? I had read all the information & requirements of the counselors... but what did I really know about these people and where they were taking my son?

About a week into the expedition I received a phone call from Steve Sawyer. I was panicked, at first thinking something had happened to Donovan. Steve quickly assured me the call was a weekly status update about Donovan's therapy. There were some struggles, probably predictable given his emotional state and all he'd been through in his life. There were encouraging moments to report, too. It was good to talk with Steve and get a sense of what was happening in every day life and hear what direction Donovan's therapeutic interventions were taking. I worried a lot less by week two.

At the culmination of the three week expedition and family day presentation I was nervous and excited to see my boy. I tearfully enjoyed hearing the youth talk of their trip; the exciting challenges, teamwork, the struggles, and ownership of their team and individual progress. I saw young men revel in their triumphs and cry at the pain they'd left in the woods. I felt their successes and their struggles. I was proud of each one of them even though, except for my own son, I'd only just met them all.

Each youth had a private family meeting with their primary therapist. I learned of my son's breakthroughs out in the wilderness. Interestingly, the boy I sent into the wilderness was left behind. In his place returned an emerging young man.

Donovan returned to school in fall of 2009 as a sophomore and is doing well. He's confident and self assured, a positive self advocate and has his personal direction for his future. Many people have given Donovan 'kudos', saying he accomplished a feat that they themselves probably couldn't have done. Donovan has since been on another 4day expedition where he achieved Snowy Owl. Donovan is planning on another 4day winter expedition in January or February and a 21day summer expedition in 2010 with the goal to begin Junior Staff training in summer 2010.

As his mom, I am eternally grateful for New Vision Wilderness for helping us through a very dark time in my son's life. I consider the staff an extension of our family; they helped raise my boy right along side me. NVW embodies the saying "It takes a village to raise a child".