

The gift of a **better** life

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Montana Academy students reflect on lessons learned at remote school.

Does Santa Claus exist?
Prove it.

That was instructor Jason Rasco's directive on Wednesday to the nine students in his writing class at Montana Academy near Marion. They had just two minutes to draft the persuasive essay, then were tasked to write about the opposite viewpoint: Prove Santa doesn't exist. Griffin, 17, was the one of the first to offer his argument against St. Nick.

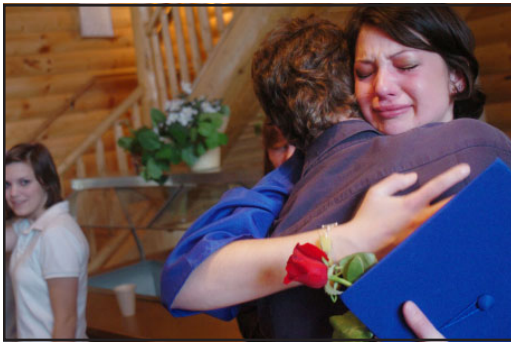
"There's no sleigh on Earth that has the gas mileage, the speed and the handling to complete the task of delivering presents to every child", he maintained.

"With gas prices where they are today, Santa just would not have the means to purchase that much petroleum."

Brett, 16, took a practical approach to explaining Santa's realness, pointing to tangible evidence. Cookies and milk disappear on the eve of his arrival; presents appear.

Writing persuasive essays is one of many exercises Rasco steps his students through with the goal of not only teaching writing skills but also helping the teens express

their opinions and their feelings. Students spent the last half of Wednesday's class doing the final editing on their personal essays. The essay topic - Christmas memories -



MARY HUGS her friend Wes Laws after graduating from Montana Academy on Friday morning. "I am going to miss this place so much." says Mary, who is going to study in France next year. "I've never had so many people mean so much to me



DURING A GROUP therapy session at the Montana Academy, Tommy listens to his fellow team members tell him what they think his challenges will be in the upcoming semester.



CAROL SANTA, right, walks with her student Caroline to the Montana Academy's horse barn for a final horse ride before Caroline's graduation.

seems benign enough, but for the teens in crisis at this residential therapeutic school, those memories are often a mishmash of bitter and sweet.

The therapeutic effects of writing are "pretty amazing," Rasco said. "I tell them writing will be one of the most intimate things they'll do in life," he said.

Andrew, 16, used his essay to tackle some of the grief that brought him to the remote boarding school in the first place. He was just 10 when his father died suddenly of a heart attack right before Christmas. "It was tough," he recalled. "It still is, but getting it [the grief] out makes it easier."

Andrew has a large, supportive family in San Francisco that he's looking forward to reconnecting with when he returns home this week. He's graduating from the academy after a 20-month stay. It wasn't drugs, alcohol or delinquent behavior that brought him to the Marion-area ranch - It was the unresolved grief of his father's death. He felt driven to take care of his mother and his older autistic brother. "I just needed a break," he said. Andrew will rejoin his high school class, and after graduation in 2007, he's eyeing Stanford University. He wants a career in medical research.

John, a 17-year-old from Kentucky, arrived at Montana Academy six months ago burdened with the guilt he felt over the suicides of two of his closest friends. Substance abuse added layers of problems to his life. "I started drinking when I was 11," he said. "I started [drinking] to feel more comfortable and normal." John plunged into drug and alcohol abuse after the suicides of his friends. He spent 11 weeks at a wilderness treatment



A student hangs out in the library. Although most of their days are structured, students still have some down time.

program in Georgia, and when he got in trouble there for lying, he made a choice to set his life back on track. "I was sick and tired of being sick and tired," he said. The opportunity to work with his parents as he goes through the treatment program has been the best part of his Montana Academy experience so far. He's also getting in touch with his emotions. "I'm more of an intellect, but I've been working on feeling more," he said. "I met a friend here who's more emotional. We help each other out."



Sean and Joe sit during an exercise near the end of their final therapy session of the semester at Montana Academy.

Christmas came early for the 20 students - the largest graduating class to date - who celebrated the completion of their stay at Montana Academy with a commencement ceremony Friday morning.

Leah, 15, was both excited and nervous about getting back to the California city in which she was raised. "I don't like nature that much," she confided. "I'm excited to go back to the city." She came to Montana Academy 15 months ago with a drug-abuse problem and some family



Montana Academy students sit in Phil Jones' literature class Wednesday morning. The Academy uses a powerful natural setting, and then places students of all ages together in the classroom and therapy sessions.

issues. "I was basically growing up too fast," she said. "Before I came here I didn't like adults or authority." Leah didn't ask for anything this Christmas, but she got what she wanted - and

needed - a relationship with her family.

Family is the integral ingredient in the academy's success. Parents come to the ranch for a rigorous interview to see if they're a proper fit for the program. "We really select for parents," medical director Dennis Malinak said. The bottom line is that parents must become involved in their children's treatment.

Founded by John & Rosemary McKinnon and John and Carol Santa in 1997, the academy has become one of the premier treatment programs for teens by combining an emotional-growth curriculum (designed for youths with psychological problems) with a dual academic curriculum. It has graduated



Team leader Dave Hartman laughs with his students from left, Bo, Erik, Ben, Evan and Mike while looking at photos from the semester. Students at the school are divided into teams that work together to help each other through the program.

about 300 teenagers since it opened. Not all 300 are success stories. Most of the alumni struggle at first when they leave the comfortable and secure environment of the ranch. "We've tried to survey all of them," John Santa said, "And we got a 60 percent response. Most of them are doing real well." If academy alumni resume the use of drugs and alcohol, "they'll take a stumble," John McKinnon said. "But they'll get back up."

Hardly a day goes by that Dr. Malinak doesn't hear from one of the alumni or the students' parents, he said, reading an appreciative note in a Christmas card from one of his former students. Team leader Mary'I Luntsford said she still gets a call every two months from a student who graduated from the academy six years ago. "It's a big part of their past," she said, "and an integral bridge to their future."



Graduation Day recognizes students' completion of the emotional growth program. Some students earn their high school diploma as well.