

From Out of Control to Strawberry Queen: One Client's Story

by Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Program Marketing Communication Director Julia Andrick

Erin VanAtta was running away from home and abusing drugs and alcohol. She aspired to become a bartender. Today, she is attending Western Oregon University and plans to become an elementary school teacher.

Three years ago, Erin was out of control. Her father had sent her to a local counselor but she wasn't willing to work to change her behavior. She would leave her counseling session and return to her friends who were planning the next party. Looking for solutions, her father enrolled her in Catherine Freer's 21-day wilderness expedition.

Erin's anger at her father was palpable when he told her she would be participating in the program. She held tight to that anger as she backpacked in unfamiliar high desert terrain far from her friends and the comforts of home.

"It was pretty intense," Erin explained. "I was so angry. We couldn't speak while we were hiking, so I was with my own thoughts all day, working everything out in my mind. It took me two weeks and then I accepted it was my fault. It wasn't my dad wanting to make me suffer. I saw where my life was going and I didn't like it."

Erin was in a group with seven other troubled teenagers. Three staff members led the adolescents on the backpacking expedition. One was a master's level therapist who lived in the field throughout the duration of the expedition. Erin received powerful "in the moment" therapy in addition to participating in peer group sessions, individual therapy, and psychoeducational groups. This unmatched therapeutic intensity resulted in a remarkable outcome for Erin.

She reached a turning point when she received a letter from her father. "I finally realized how poorly I'd been treating my family. I want them to be proud of me and do things that make them proud," said Erin. And that's when she began to work to make a change.

After completing the wilderness expedition, she spent more than two months in Freer's Oregon Transition Home program where she was able to put to use the tools she had learned in a safe and nurturing home environment.

Erin eventually returned to high school nearly four months later. Her old friends had assumed that she was in jail.

"I told them they were making choices that I didn't want in my life anymore and I said goodbye," she said.

She recently graduated with honors from high school and was named as her hometown's Strawberry Festival Queen.

"Returning from Catherine Freer, I felt out of place at home and didn't have any friends that weren't doing drugs. And then to become the queen of my community's biggest event made me feel like I've finally found my place in world. I know it sounds corny but its true," she explained.

"I highly recommend Catherine Freer to any parent that feels that they have lost touch with their child and can't steer them in the right direction," Erin said. She added, "I told many of my friend's parents when I got home."

About Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Programs

Since 1988, Catherine Freer's therapeutically enhanced wilderness programs have given thousands of at-risk youth the tools necessary to build self-confidence and to make a new start. The Albany, Ore., based company operates 21 and 51-day wilderness therapy expeditions, Santiam Crossing School, an outdoor therapeutic school, and Oregon Transition Homes. Licensed by the state of Oregon as both a substance abuse and mental health treatment program, Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Programs is a founding member the National Association for Therapeutic Schools and Programs and is accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations. For more information, please visit the web site at [www.http://www.cfreer.com](http://www.cfreer.com) or call (800) 390-3983.

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