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To Those Concerned with the Welfare of a Struggling Teen-age Boy:

This letter is written to you upon the advice of our son, Shankar Tillotson, who will turn 19 in September and who spent 14 months in the Galena Ridge / Mountain Meadow Youth Ranch program under the guidance of Paul Clark. Shankar entered the program 3 years ago this month. His transformation from a frustrated, angry, non-communicative teenager with substance abuse problems to a self-confident, open, drug and alcohol free young adult was accomplished thanks to the Galena Ridge / Mountain Meadow program. We have nothing but praise for the remarkable work done with boys in this program by Paul Clark with Joe and Marilyn Frields as well as the fine staff.

To begin, I'd like to say that we were surprised at the end of our son's first summer in the program, when we finally met the parents of the other boys, to find out how many fine, stable, caring parents these boys had. We certainly never expected to need to send our son into someone else's care; we thought only 'loser' parents did such things. And here was a whole set of good parents, some married, some divorced, who had felt the need to find an alternative setting for their sons - many fearing for their boys very lives if they were not removed from their home environment and were not helped to reshape the direction of their life-courses. By the same token, the program has trouble making headway with boys when either of the parents undermines its efforts, as we unfortunately saw in the case of one otherwise promising boy. We sent our son to Galena Ridge after he had been arrested for buying marijuana at school, had continued to use pot and get drunk regularly, after I had overheard a phone call in which he was trying to buy crack cocaine and Ecstasy, and after he left his English journal out on the kitchen table filled cover to cover with a stream of profanity expressing oceans of anger that we never knew existed. He now tells us that

we sent him just in the nick of time: I quote him in saying that he was on the rim of the bowl and was just about to flush himself down when we sent him to Montana. So as parents with tremendous concerns about whether we were really doing the right thing in sending our son away, we now know that it was the overwhelmingly right decision.

The Galena Ridge program is founded upon the principle of discovering what one truly needs in life - and learning that drugs and alcohol aren't on the list. In the rigors of outdoor life during summer course, the boys face physical challenges that call upon stamina, skills and inner resources that are seldom tapped in urban or suburban life. The boys find out that there is very little that they truly need, besides food, water and shelter - and people who really care about them. All of the distracting allures of modern life - the media and music with their driving beats of violence and sensuality and money and non-stop consumerism - all these are left behind as the boys trek up quiet mountains under the vast Montana sky. Fresh air and sweat - the simplicity of life in the wilderness - in itself has a calming and clarifying effect on the adolescent psyche. Galena takes extra measures to enhance the experience in nature. Before sending the boys into the great outdoors, Galena's staff does a complete search procedure of the boys and their belongings, checking places like clothing seams and retainer cases for hidden substances (in which they discovered more contraband in our son's possession than anyone had previously tried to smuggle into the program.) Once in the outback, the boys' access to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, boom boxes or M-TV is virtually nil. Just spending substance-free time is for some boys an immense relief, although not all participants are subject to this particular problem. It's clean living in a lot of dirt. (It's amazing how a boy can come to appreciate a hot shower or even a flush toilet after a summer without them.) One boy per night is in charge of starting a fire with a 'bow-drill', without the use of matches. If he doesn't take the time and patience to master the skill, everyone eats cold food that night - and the peer pressure to make a greater effort in the future is intense. No boy is ever put in danger, but discomfort is certainly in great supply if the boys don't begin taking responsibility for their lives and for those near to them - something many of them have never really been asked to do before. It's one thing for mom to nag the kid about making his bed so his room looks halfway presentable, it's another

thing for the kid to end up sleeping in the rain because he didn't bother to put up a pup tent with the tarp, rope and instructions that Galena provided him with. They find out that they can survive without a lot of "stuff", and they gain self-respect at being able to provide for their true needs - cooking their own food, building a fire, or pitching a tent in a rain storm. The combination of outdoor living with Galena's insistence upon personal responsibility has a bracing effect on the despondent youth.

The other guiding principle of the program is honesty - being honest with oneself and being honest with others. Most of the boys have been living lives of continual deception, in a youth culture that is largely based on deceiving parents, teachers or any other adults with authority. In the Galena program, Paul Clark helps the boys to realize that friendship doesn't deserve its name if it means telling lies or staying silent while your "friend" destroys himself. And if you can't be honest with your parents, the closest people in your life, Paul reasons, how can you have any self-dignity? Paul is relentless during "check-ins" (group circle meetings) at holding the mirror up to the boys about all the shenanigans they have been up to - and Paul and his well-trained staff have seen it all before. Paul continually surprises the boys by seeing straight through all their games, excuses and denial. And he manages to get the boys to call each other on their self-deceptions. Every boy is given the opportunity to face his actions, his words and his motives, and to see them for what they really are. Such honesty is liberating. Metaphorically, the process that a boy at Galena Ridge goes through is not unlike that of a butterfly struggling to shed the thick cocoon he has spun around himself - and in the case of our son, the resulting change was no less dramatic.

By the time our son had gone through one summer at Galena Ridge, he had undergone amazing changes. He talked openly about his problems in ways that we never would have thought possible. He felt that he had a lot more work to do to really lead a sober life, and that he should spend the school year in the Mountain Meadow Youth Ranch program. With Joe and Marilyn Fields, he lived with six to eight other teens in their house while attending the local high school. It was not a lock-down situation, so substance abuse was not impossibility. However, all of the boys' activities were highly monitored and their time well-

structured. The high school is attended by students from at least four "programs" in the surrounding area. The high school principle told us that many of his valedictorians and star athletes have come from the programs - which frequently provide highly talented kids who haven't in the past been able to show their true potential. In fact, besides maintaining strong grades throughout the year, our son emerged as the school's leading cross-country runner. Back in the house with Joe and Marilyn, he followed a pretty tight weekly schedule of chores, homework, community service, AA meetings, occasional fun outings, and regular group "check-ins" with Paul to help the boys stay on track. Kids who couldn't stay on track faced predictable consequences, losing privileges or spending time "on solo". If necessary, a boy might be sent back out camping in the wilderness with a staff member until he was ready to participate again in social life. The boys sent letters home weekly. The camaraderie among the boys was strong, and our son made the kind of real friendships that he hadn't been able to participate in for years up until that time.

In order to consolidate his progress, our son decided that he should stay for a couple of months the next summer, taking more of a leadership position in the group and serving as a role model for newer campers in the Galena Ridge program. By the time he came home for good, 14 months after entering the program, our son was a pleasure to have in the family again. He no longer tormented his younger siblings, and in fact, they really enjoyed each other's company. He began attending a different high school in our city for his junior year, made real friends and never renewed any of his old druggie acquaintances. He determined that Marijuana Anonymous was a healthy organization for him to attend. He now goes to occasional NA meetings and sometimes even leads them. Meanwhile, he did well enough in school academically to be accepted at a state university for this coming fall, and athletically he won a top team award from the coaches in each of the four track and cross country seasons in which he participated. He has turned his addictive tendency towards the healthy activity of running, doing about 65 miles a week of training. Unbelievably, he now talks to us about his worries and his hopes, brings his friends and dates home for us to meet, and even thanks us sometimes for being such great parents. He's a happy guy these days.

We have enormous gratitude for Paul Clark, Joe and Marilyn Frields, and the Galena Ridge and Mountain Meadow Youth Ranch programs that helped our son through a stage in his life that we were unequipped to deal with, as much as we loved him. We would recommend this wonderful program for any teenage boy struggling to find his way in today's world.

Sincerely yours,

Renée Tillotson