

An Oasis of Adolescence: Midland School

By Michelle Howard

If you google “teenagers in America,” what do you expect of the first page of results? Would you anticipate finding any good news there?

I’ll save you the keystrokes and give you the answer: not one of the top results for that particular search string yield good news. Key words include: “stressed, broken, performing poorly.”

How about “high school education in the United States”? The first news hit I get back is a Slate article with this uplifting title: [“High school in America: a complete disaster.”](#)

I’m well aware that the generally accepted ways to approach the subject matter of teens, at least in the U.S., are to:

- a) complain about them
- b) worry about them
- c) complain about them because you’re afraid to admit how much you are worrying about them

Some time back around my daughter’s fifth grade year I started experiencing the “oh-you-will-soon-have-a-teenager sympathy syndrome,” with symptoms ranging from knowing looks from relative strangers, harrowing survival tales told by an airplane seatmate, and fearful coffee dates with other moms.

In my younger parenting years, the battle I’d picked was the “re-releasing children into the wild” battle; attempting to defend the basic childhood right (and rites) of time spent outside, even in the era of the indoorization of childhood. Michael Chabon’s essay, *The Wilderness of Childhood*, so poignantly describes that “very grave, very significant shift in our idea of childhood,” away from freedom, towards the screen and the schedule. He writes, further:

“The thing that strikes me now when I think about the Wilderness of Childhood is the incredible degree of freedom my parents gave me to adventure there... The Wilderness of Childhood is gone; the days of adventure are past. The land ruled by children, to which a kid might exile himself for at least some portion of every day from the neighboring kingdom of adulthood, has in large part been taken over, co-opted, colonized, and finally absorbed by the neighbors.”

In my years of parenting a middle-schooler, I kept flying the banner of freedom and time outdoors, but added a new pennant, which read, “Having a teenager surely does not have to be horrible.” The whole kids-need-nature idea turned out to be a pretty palatable one for the friends, family and masses, maybe it’s even a meme nowadays. But resisting the tide of terrible tales of teens seems to be less popular. At

cocktail parties, admitting that I don't want to give up on my dream of having a good relationship with my daughter as she traverses these years gets me the same kind of looks as those I receive when I confess to not having watched either *Game of Thrones* OR *Orange is the New Black*. (I'm more adept at dodging the TV topics; often a slight act of misdirection can turn the conversation in the safer direction of Kindles vs. print.)

It isn't actually an entirely radical idea, nor is it new or mine. Margaret Mead, back in 1925, used her cultural anthropology approach to conduct research from which "it was conclusively established that the disturbances which vex our (American) adolescents are ontological or culturally specific and not universal. In essence they are a product of civilization."

Perhaps if I were Margaret Mead, the rest of this essay would explicate my theory about how we can shift the culture towards a system that is more accommodating of teens and their needs. Instead, this is just one story, one mom's journey to find an alternative.

The ultimate "test" of my nature-connection parenting was my willingness to send my kid out to play. Outside. Without an adult. Even when Concerned Neighbors called me with, well... concerns. The test of my pro-teenage parenting was harder. In June of the summer before her eighth grade year, Adrienne developed a crush. On a school. She read every word on every page of their website, watched the video in their admissions packet as she might reruns of *Glee*, and mounted her campaign to convince me to permit her to apply.

The object of her affections was Midland School, a picturesque place on nearly 3,000 acres positioned intentionally in a rural valley midway between the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles. Still a working farm and ranch where the students hold the jobs that make the place tick while studying hard and living in rustic cabins, Midland is almost but not quite a place that time forgot. There, for over 80 years, ambitious adolescents have devoted themselves to values that are timeless, and yet somehow profoundly and newly relevant today. The school's motto is "live your education," and the rigorous schedule supports students as they focus on college- prep academics while performing all the tasks necessary to keep the place running. Chop wood. Carry water (or maybe at least fix the pipes). Know a place. Be outdoors. Find yourself there.

Midland has managed, somehow, to preserve that timeless feeling of integrity, of the value of actual work, of a studious life, while folding in some treasures of modernity: internet (although not for streaming Netflix), a focus on diversity and equality, a well-stocked library with all the current dystopian young adult bestsellers. No cell phones allowed. No video games. I'm no Luddite (I spent seven happy years working at a software company), but screens are the archenemy of the outdoor child.

Here's another google guessing game for you: if you Google "boarding school news," do you think you get good news? I know Google knows I'm in California, but I don't know if Google skews my results towards a dominant attitude I've encountered here in

the West, which seems to be that boarding schools are either for bad kids or bad parents. Or just for the 1% (a category many points distant from me.)

But, as Adrienne might say, here's the thing. The central psychological task, it seems, of adolescence is to develop independence. In contrast, according to the not-so-secret life of the American teenager as described by our popular media, it seems, is to extend childhood, avoid the work and responsibility required to gain that independence, and focus instead on developing social networks and consumer/viewer habits. While being simultaneously stressed and bored and racing to nowhere.

This test was harder than just sending my kid down the street to the park. A lot harder. To pass this test, I had to let her leave home. Four years earlier than expected. My one and only child, my daughter, my sidekick and partner in adventure, my favorite hiking companion.... Author Elizabeth Stone once said that having a child is like having part of your heart walk around outside your body. But this school is a lot farther outside my body than I'd planned, at least for her fourteenth year of life.

The myths all call for a test, and a journey, so we have passed this first test, and Adrienne has embarked on her journey. How could it be otherwise, when we think we found the gold: the place where she can go to work hard, learn life lessons, practice the responsibility that leads to independence, to be busy and productive (not bored and stressed) and, ultimately, to grow up.

In Midland School, we found, simply, hope. It is Adrienne's home away from home for the next four years, where she can make her own map and place herself. It is an oasis of adolescence in the wilderness of childhood. And while not every family could or would send their children to a place like Midland, we could all stand to bring a little of that timeless wisdom home, to go outside and be quiet, and heed John Muir's call: "Of all the paths you take in life, make sure a few of them are dirt."