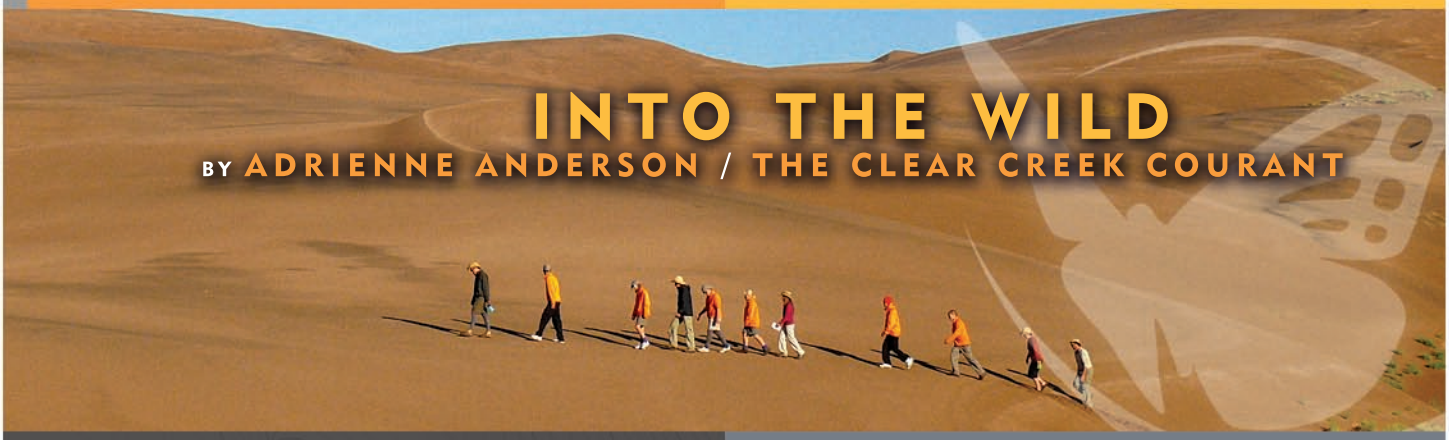

INTO THE WILD

BY ADRIENNE ANDERSON / THE CLEAR CREEK COURANT

"Our idea of a good day is a good hike and some emotional work, I don't know if that is necessarily entertainment."

Monarch Center

Today is not an ordinary hike for Georgetown resident Dave Ventimiglia. He is carrying three grocery bags full of Oreos, Snickers and Doritos up Square Top Mountain on Guanella Pass. The mountaintops are sprinkled with snow from the previous weekend's storms. In the distance, the expansive landscape is interrupted by tents and strangely out-of-place camera crews — no, this is not an ordinary day.

Ventimiglia owns and operates the Monarch Center, a wilderness therapy program for at-risk youths headquartered in Georgetown. For the next six weeks, his crew will be helping heal the wounds of six German teens flown here by a German production company and a major German television network.

The crews will be filming the experience for an eight- to 12-week documentary on wilderness therapy.

"Logistically, it's already complicated," Ventimiglia says as he hikes past Mike Lopez, an Empire local hired as a "sherpa" for the first part of the adventure. The term "sherpa" refers to the mountain guides in the Himalayas. In this case, Lopez is more of porter: running, or hiking, back and forth to Georgetown, fetching the German crews cigarettes and snacks, and hauling their heavy cameras up the mountain — generally being at the beck and call of the dozen or so misplaced Germans on the mountain.

As Ventimiglia approaches the site where the teens are backpacking along with four guides, including a therapist, the film crew is hovering around the kids' tents, waiting for them to awaken. Work is quickly halted to graciously receive the morning treats, and the Oreos don't last long. A baby-food jar holds cigarette butts collected from the film crew. They had to sign an agreement to not smoke in front of the kids.

Small beginnings

"We were young, stupid, ridiculously passionate and madly in love," Ventimiglia said of his journey with wife Lori Ventimiglia to start Monarch. "I couldn't do it again. It's been enormously trying. We begged, borrowed and stole to get this going."

Literally, they practically had to borrow children for their first nine-day excursion to St. Mary's Glacier back in 1996.

"We went to our neighbors house and said, 'Hey, we'll take your kids,' " he said. They had to borrow packs and tents for their first few trips. Eventually, they worked out a deal with the 5th Judicial District, which sent them children in the system. The couple did this for about seven years, getting paid $112 per kid, per day. It may sound like a lot, but it barely covered expenses, and the state money soon ran out.

"We did our noble deed for seven years," Ventimiglia said. "But we couldn't work at that rate anymore."

Now the business charges $395 a day per kid and operates excursions 365 days of the year. With an average of six to eight kids on each excursion, it's not hard to figure the Ventimiglias have built a thriving business helping children heal — and now they are being spotlighted on the international stage.

When life and television intersect

Monarch was approached by the production company a couple of years ago, but the timing was off. Since then, the company has aired two seasons of shows about children who went through a similar program in Oregon.

Ventimiglia admitted he was nervous about the prospect — not for himself, but for the kids.

"You have six German kids who know they are on camera and are struggling emotionally," Ventimiglia said. "It generally doesn't lessen their acting out."

But on this gorgeous Wednesday morning, the kids emerge from their tents quiet and calm. It is their third day camping, and they are set to spend the day in isolation, writing their life stories.

By American standards, there was not much fodder for TV entertainment.

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Monarch Center

work," Ventimiglia said. "I don't know if that is necessarily entertainment."

Executive producer Volker Neuenhoff with Tresor Productions says Germans' idea of good television is very different than Americans'.

"This is not reality television," Neuenhoff said. "Reality television is scripted and staged. We film what's going on. It's classic documentary. This is happening despite us being there, not because of us being there. That is the fundamental difference from reality television."

And although the film company's intentions are pure, Ventimiglia knows the power of editing and that he will have no chance to review the final product before it airs.

"We are in a high-risk business. The whole thing gives me a little anxiety," Ventimiglia said. "But they are almost starting to blend with the landscape. We would like to think that the way we run our program can handle 24-hour scrutiny. It's a good test for us."

Never cry wolf

The next adventure will take the kids, three girls and three boys, on a 23-mile hike from the Great Sand Dunes to a Mission: Wolf sanctuary. It is there where the real work begins.

Ventimiglia's voice becomes quiet as he talks about the experience of introducing the kids to the wolves; if the teens are ready, they will feed the wolves.

"These are angry kids that struggle with their relationships with humans," he says. "A lot of healing can happen with animals."

It is customary for wolves to greet each other by nibbling on each other's lips.

"They are very attentive, and they sense anger. The wolves will actually come up to the kids and nibble on their gums. My heart just races. It's a spiritual experience for the kids."

And, in the same way that the wolves will circle the kids, the children have been circling the Monarch staff, wondering whom they can trust.

One girl, Jenny, who seems the most affected by the presence of cameras, spits near Ventimiglia. He spits back. They go on like this for a few minutes, hiking up the hill. They punch each other in the shoulder, and a big smile surfaces on Jenny's face. The two don't speak the same language, but they are clearly communicating.

"It's the relationship," Ventimiglia says while reflecting on the interaction. "That's where the magic happens. If you look at (Mount) Bierstadt with a kid you have no relationship with, they are thinking, 'There is no way in hell I am going climb that.' But if you have a relationship with the kid, they will be at the top of that mountain. That's when unbelievable things start to happen."