

also participate in other outdoor activities like canoeing and white water rafting. Hardy said the wilderness environment is part of the rehabilitation process.

"The environment itself is very serene," he said. "It's like a community. It gives them a place where they can find themselves."

PWI offers GED programs and college scholarships to those who wish to continue their education. "Our mission is to take these

troubled youths and turn them into productive citizens," Hardy said.

They also participate in community service. Every week, they help load meals for Meals On Wheels. Occasionally, they provide groundskeeping work at the Whitten Center, and clean up after events at the YMCA.

"We try to keep the kids involved in the community," Hardy said. "This is a great opportunity for young men who have made some bad decisions in life. It's definitely an asset in the state of South Carolina."

Piedmont Wilderness giving kids a second chance

By Steve Bennaka
Staff Writer

(Fourteenth in a series about United Way-funded agencies in Laurens County. Due to a composing error, a portion of the story was omitted from the Dec. 12 issue of The Chronicle.)

Some youth often find themselves in trouble with law enforcement or at school. For many, hanging out with the wrong crowd and making poor decisions can lead to a life of instruction and crime. But a local organization is offering these kids a place to go to turn their lives around.

Laurens County is home to Piedmont Wilderness Institute (PWI), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping delinquent males between the ages of 14 and 17. PWI offers a program that takes most participants between five and



Program Director Ricky Hardy said PWI strives to help at-risk boys make good decisions.

"They come from environments in their communities that support negative behavior," Hardy said. "We try to show them that there is a positive spin on life."

The program focuses on three steps of rehabilitation: behavior modification, education and treatment. Program participants must abide by PWI's strict rules, which prevent behavioral problems. The youth attend school in the morning with instruction from certified teachers. Drug and alcohol counseling is available to those who need it, and a mental health counselor is available to meet with program participants



Dorm life: Boys in the Piedmont Wilderness Institute program stay in a plain dormitory they are expected to keep clean and organized. — Photo by Steve Bennaka

PWI by the Department of Juvenile Justice. Hardy said most crimes committed by the youth are minor, such as truancy or misdemeanor drug and property offenses.

Program participants are classified in a rank system, earn bronze, silver or gold "cards" based on their progress. As they accumulate cards, they move up the ranks. Once a youth reaches captain status, he can apply for potential graduate status to finish the program.

United Way of Laurens County. Most of that money is spent on educational supplies, like pens and paper.

The Department of Juvenile Justice provides PWI with most of its budget, which is used for operating costs and staff salaries. Other sources of income include local foundations and private contributions.

PWI is under the jurisdiction of Associated Marine Institutes, an organization based in Tampa, Fla., that operates similar programs in eight states.

Hardy said PWI's program is much more successful than a typical lock-and-key facility. He said 7 out of 10 boys who complete the program stay out of subsequent trouble with the law.

"It's a great program," Hardy said. "You definitely see change in kids once they complete our program."

PWI offers team-building activities like climbing walls and ropes courses. The youth

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