

Searching the lost and found

By **TOM MULLEN**

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They come to Pickering Passage by the dozens. Some under direction of the courts and others because their parents insist, but they share one thing in common: They are all very near the end of the road, metaphorically speaking.

When they get here, just a few miles north of Shelton, they are taken to the literal end of the road, where the wilderness begins.

Nate and Emma Welch founded a wilderness therapy business where they run a behavioral and chemical disorder program for youths and young adults.

The process is simple: team leaders (professional therapists) take attendees into the million-acre wilderness of Olympic National Park, where they hike, camp and survive anywhere from six to 12 weeks.

There are no luxuries like cellphones, or the fundamental marks of civilization such as toilets or showers.

"The only time they get a shower out there," Nate explained, "is from nature."

After a yearlong tour in Afghanistan, Capt. Nate Welch found it difficult to return to a normal life in the states. As a captain, he oversaw the disarming of explosives meant to kill American soldiers.

"I did route clearance for a year and I did the math. We found a bomb every four days. There



Courtesy photos

Rites of Passage Wilderness Therapy includes kayaking treks in the waters in and around the Olympic Peninsula.

Emma was born in England, near Surrey, and came to know the Americas through the personal battles her mother fought with addiction.

"I had worked with women and children who were victims of domestic violence and Nate came into this on the business side with his MBA. He came

GENESIS

The two originally met as neighbors.

"I had a little West Highland terrier, Skye, and she had broken her back leg chasing a neighbor's cat and the vets told me I had to crate her for a couple months," Emma recalled, "I couldn't keep her in a crate so I decided I had to put

her hand at retro-fitting it for her Westie.

Nate witnessed her altering the device while he was renting a room near hers.

"Nate is an engineer and he didn't just fix my dog wheels. He then came over and fixed my motorbike and then he invited me to see phosphorescent. So

bomb every four days. There were 26 bombs that found us and we found the rest, 76, total. We found 50 that didn't detonate," he recalled to the *Journal*.

When he returned to the United States, the Alaskan native discovered that life without the eminent threat of death wasn't filling his cup. It was an experience he said he shared with many of the men in his command.

"It was such a stretching period. As an individual coming back to run-of-the-mill life, I needed something more. We supported the Marines over there in the poppy fields, in the marijuana fields and this is my opinion, but I think a lot of the drugs followed us here," Nate said. "These are good guys and their lives fall apart. I would say 40 to 50 percent of our guys end up in trouble with the law, and as a leader, it's hard not to take on some of that as personal. After my child died, I just crashed and burned for a while. They reassigned me."

back from the war and then we lost our child so he had two traumas to deal with, the loss of a child and the war," she recalled.

wheels on."

Doggy-rickshaws are expensive and the second-hand device provided by her veterinarian was too big, so she tried

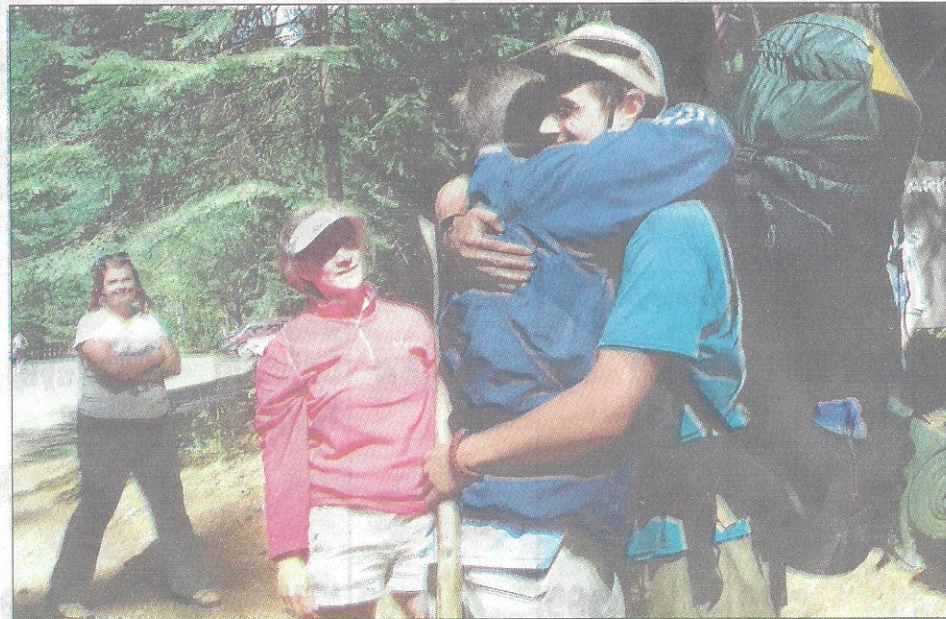
we hiked down to the beach — I thought he just wanted to be my friend. He didn't make a move," she smiled at the memory of their first date.



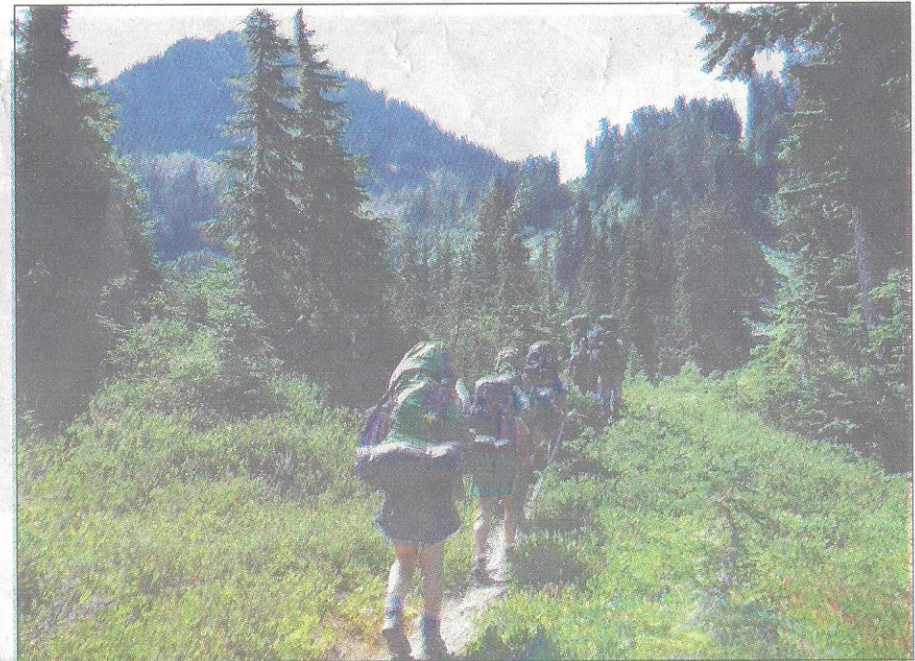
Rites of Passage employs about 20 therapists who serve as leaders.

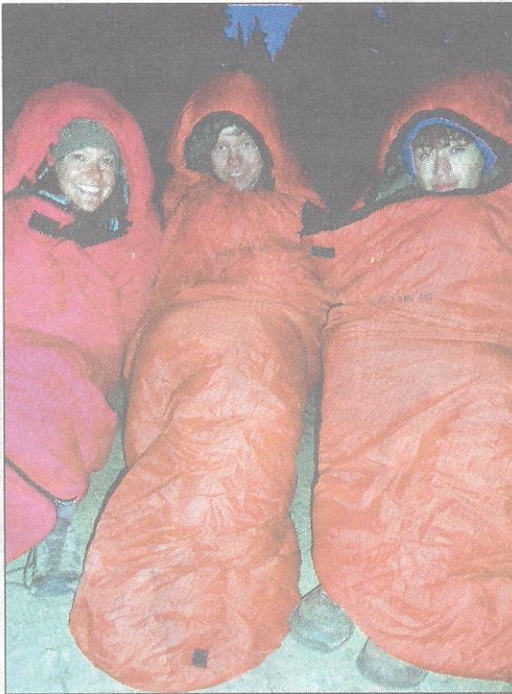


The young people who experience wilderness therapy, founder Nate Welch says, will remember it for the rest of their lives.



Graduation ceremonies are an emotional time for parents and their children.





Like peas in a pod are the youths who experience wilderness therapy.

“These boys don’t have girlfriends anymore. They have video games. One in four Americans today are addicted to technology.”

Emma Welch



Trekkers shake technology addiction cold turkey in the woods.

They agreed to become partners in life and in business, and it was to be a business of helping young people deal with addiction.

Nate recalled his childhood in Alaska:

“When we were kids it was, ‘Go out and play and don’t come back till dark!’ Now kids are playing video games all night long with kids in Australia — when it’s daytime down there — so they never go to bed.”

“These boys don’t have girlfriends anymore,” Emma declared. “They have video games. One in four Americans today are addicted to technology.”

It would seem the wilderness is the perfect place to shed such addictions.

“I worked in this industry in my 20s, as a guide and I saw that this kind of experience in life is what you hold onto.

These kids remember this for the rest of their life,” Nate said.

The couple started their business a few years ago with just a “wilderness truck,” Emma recalled, “The kayaks came year two. We have 29 trails and eight water trails.”

After acquiring the land and its improvements, which includes 2 acres of tidelands to support their fledgling oyster farm, they began to look toward providing long-term secondary therapy for adults, ages 18 to 30.

“They do their time on trail and they get their priorities straightened out but if I can keep them here in Washington, I can get a them a job, get them back to school, but if you send them back to the old environment they’re not going to do very well,” Nate said.

They now have five beds for such

work.

“Your second 30 years are pretty much like your first 30 years, so if we can get them on the right track while they’re young, they have a better chance,” Nate suggested. “I had a kid run away from me on Monday and I took him to the E.R. because he was claiming suicidal thoughts. While I’m sitting in the E.R. in Shelton, there’s a guy there that was bleeding to death. He’d been stabbed multiple times and for this kid to see that kind of trauma, first hand, it made a big impression. This industry has two trains of thought, the survival base and the other is rite of passage.”

“We are not a boot camp,” Emma continued for her husband. “Their parents send them here to a therapeutic camp and we do a mentorship program so they can come back and help new people.”

Nate and Emma said their Rites of Passage (ROP) Wilderness Camp now has 20 employees and more than one reality-based television producer to document their work has courted them.

“These young people are separated into groups based on their issues,” Emma explained. “The groups are co-ed and they tolerate each other. Dirty, stinky boys aren’t very attractive after a week on the trail without a shower.”

The work, they admit, seems endless, but they said the hours after 5 p.m. are for them and their two young children.

“This is kind of the working period of our lives so if I can get this established and fermented that would be great,” Nate concluded. “The woods is therapy for me. That kid that ran away, he’s bought in now. He’s out on trail right now leading. That fills my cup.”



Journal photo by Tom Mullen

LEFT PAGE: A group of youths hikes off into the wilderness for at least six weeks of wilderness therapy. Many of these kids come from big cities.
ABOVE: Nate, Emma and their 10-month-old, Jericho Chance Welch recently purchased a slice of heaven for their family and the clients they serve at Rites of Passage Wilderness Therapy, which is headquartered on Pickering Passage near Shelton.