

Mason County

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A couple's therapy program

Nathan and Emma
Welch have founded
Rites of Passage,
a wilderness therapy
program.

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Rites of Passage offers wilderness therapy programs

By ARLA SHEPHARD
MASON COUNTY LIFE

Therapy doesn't have to take place on a couch or within four walls.

Therapy can take place outside, while gardening or kayaking. It can take place while caring for animals. It can take place out on a hike in the Olympic National Park.

Emma and Nathan Welch firmly believe in the power of nature to help adults and teens heal from chemical dependency, depression, technology addiction and other mental health issues.

As the founders and co-owners of Rites of Passage, the couple joined a growing field of wilderness therapy programs nationwide when they started their company in 2010.

This past December, in an effort to be closer to Olympic National Park, they moved their growing business to Mason County, on 12 acres near Harstine Island.

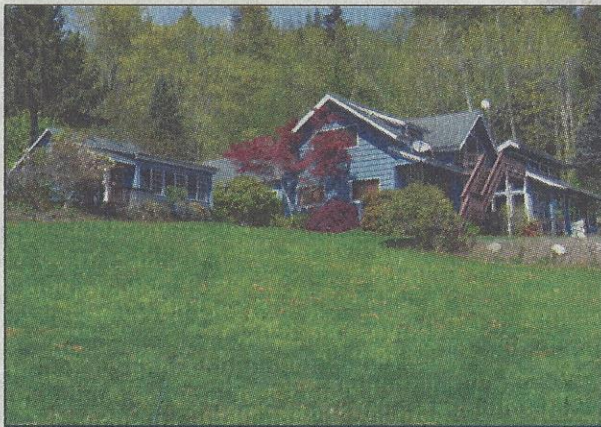
"It's paradise, really, even on a rainy day," said Emma Welch in a crisp English accent with her 3- and 6-month-old puppies trailing behind. "We've arrived. This is our home."

Rites of Passage offers six- to 12-week wilderness therapy treks to all four quadrants of Olympic National Park, where groups of teens and adults learn survival skills, self-reflect and participate in cognitive and family therapy with mental health professionals.

The treks often include



PHOTO ABOVE COURTESY OF RITES OF PASSAGE | PHOTOS BELOW BY ARLA SHEPHARD, MASON COUNTY LIFE
Groups of teens and adults, above, take part in wilderness therapy treks to Olympic National Park and on Puget Sound. Kayakers often cover up to 50 to 60 miles on water over the course of 12 weeks. Below left, located outside of Shelton near Harstine Island, Rites of Passage has an office and residential units on 12 acres. Below right, more than a dozen alpacas live at the headquarters, along with chickens and dogs.



working at the ranch, volunteering in the community, attending school and

Welch had worked in the outdoor recreational in-



dustry in his early 20s, but it wasn't until he served in

Afghanistan that he began to realize what direction

he wanted his life to take.

"I wanted to give back," he said. "My cup wasn't full. You go to the second-poorest place in the world and you learn that you're essentially fighting poverty. Many of the guys I served with returned home and destroyed their lives. The real war is with chemical dependency, suicide."

While Nathan worked with men on addiction and chemical dependency issues, his future wife, Emma, worked with survivors of domestic violence.

The couple met in 2008, after Emma's West Highland White Terrier suffered a torn ligament from chasing a cat.

Emma was visiting a friend who was renting out a room to Nathan. When Nathan came down the stairs, he saw Emma and her friend attempting to harness an oversized doggie wheelchair to the back of her pet.

"He must have thought we looked crazy," Emma said. "He was a combat engineer, so he was able to mechanically figure out what we were doing wrong."

The couple started dating before Nathan left for his last deployment to Afghanistan. Emma started to look for houses for them to live in when he returned.

"We did everything backwards," she recalled. "We were engaged in 2009, but we bought a house before we ever lived together."

Sound.

The company also provides separate obesity health and wellness camps and last year started the Ranch, a long-term care program based on their property in Shelton.

The Ranch extends the work done during the wilderness therapy treks and is designed for young adults who want to stay sober and get healthy by

plan for their health.

Space at the Ranch is limited to five beds starting this fall. Stays can last up to 11 months.

Nathan wrote the curriculum for Rites of Passage in 2009, while he was deployed in Afghanistan as an Army National Guard captain and working on his master's in business administration from Grantham University.

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The couple started Rites of Passage as soon as Nathan returned to their home in Bellingham.

"She didn't buy in, at first," he said. "It took some time to get her to come around."

The couple were married in 2011 and had their first daughter, Bonnie Alaska, in 2012.

Bonnie Alaska lived six weeks before dying of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Devastated, the Welches moved their home and their business to Bremerton.

"That's when we really dove into the business," Emma said. "Bellingham was too much. Friends didn't know how to deal with us or help us."

The Welches loved Bremerton, especially Emma who had never spent much time on the Olympic Peninsula.

However, they always knew they'd need to find a larger space, somewhere preferably even closer to Olympic National Park, where their business had special and commercial use permits through the Department of Natural Resources.

Rites of Passage was slowly growing each year, from three kids on the wilderness therapy program their first year in Bellingham to more than two dozen.

The number of participants wasn't the only thing growing.

"As our company grew, so did our inventory," Emma said. "We had a growing number of kayaks. You can imagine hauling those from place to place."

The couple rented a location in Tumwater for a year,

before finding their current property outside of Shelton.

The property's former owner ended up choosing the Welches over another cash buyer because she researched their business and believed in their mission.

She even decided to privately finance the couple, who had planned to use a VA loan to purchase the property.

"She saw what we did and it ended up being this beautiful alignment," Emma said.

Last year, the couple took 30 kids out on wilderness therapy treks and is on track to surpass that figure this year.

Teens and adults, who are separated into two age groups from 11-17 and 18 and older, have come from as far as New Zealand and Brunei to take part in the programs.

About 25 percent of the program participants are from Washington and Oregon. Another two-thirds are teens, while females make up one-third of the participants.

Rites of Passage employs 25 people, from ranch hands to office workers to therapists. Many of the employees have bachelor's degrees or other advanced degrees in the mental health field.

"We're growing at a pace that's manageable," Nathan said. "We don't want to get too big too soon."

On the wilderness treks, mental health professionals camp out with the groups and work with groups and individuals on evidence-based therapy.

Families back home also receive support. Once the program wraps up, family therapy takes place and

plans are made for continuing care.

"It's not like, 'Send us your child and we'll fix your child,'" Emma said. "It's more like, 'Send us your child and we'll work with them and work with your family.' We work really hard on that after-care piece. Is everyone being accountable? What are the next steps?"

Last year, Rites of Passage added its long-term care component, the Ranch, which provides residential space for people working on biological, behavioral and chemical mental health issues, as well as for people who are struggling academically or would like to mentor the trek programs.

"What organically happened is we'd get young adults who, after the 12 weeks in the wilderness, we knew we couldn't send them back home," Nathan said. "They need transition time. You're dealing with an adolescent brain that is still forming. It takes a real lifestyle change."

Rites of Passage has also started a commercial oyster farm on 2 acres that will provide aquatic education opportunities once the oysters seed in May.

The property also has an organic garden and alpacas.

For six weeks, a wilderness therapy program can cost up to \$16,500, which might not be entirely covered by insurance. The cost includes food, housing, equipment, therapy, travel and permits.

Knowing that not everybody can afford wilderness therapy, the couple started the Bonnie Alaska Welch

ON THE COVER

Nathan and Emma Welch, with their 3-month-old puppy, Rosie, own Rites of Passage, a wilderness therapy business that they moved to Mason County. Arla Shephard, Mason County Life

Children's Foundation in honor of their daughter.

The nonprofit foundation seeks funds to support low-income families who might benefit from wilderness therapy.

Lawyers, therapists, accountants and, most recently, an executive from REI serve on the board.

"Wilderness therapy might not be for everyone, but nature honestly does a lot of the healing for us," Nathan Welch said. "Half of the kids we deal with have technology issues or pornography issues. It's a whole new realm of parenting."

The couple had a second daughter, Aurora, a little more than a year ago and has a son, Atticus, on the way.

They love the beauty of Washington, which is a combination "of all the other states mixed together," Nathan said.

They look forward to their growing family and their growing business.

"We get to have a lot of fun changing lives," Emma said. "And we're changing our lives."

For information, visit ritesofpassagewilderness-therapy.com, call 800-788-0637 or email ritesofpassage4nw@gmail.com.