

Kismet Rocks

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THE DAY BEFORE MY INTERVIEW with Kismet Rock Foundation founder and director, Michael Jewell, I was driving back to Maine from New York City and happened to look over my right shoulder at a billboard along I-84. The background image was an open spiral-bound notebook and at the top of the page was written “Recession 101.” Below that was simply stated “Self worth beats net worth.”

I should also mention that on the way down to the City three days earlier, I had listened to a riveting piece about high school kids from the Chicago area using poetry as a means of expression for their teenage angst. Expressing themselves in this medium had been nothing short of life-saving for some of them. Now in its eleventh year, “Louder Than a Bomb” is the annual competition in which over 500 students and 60 poetry teams from diverse neighborhoods, backgrounds and cultures prepare for and compete in the largest teen poetry slam in the country. In the end, it’s all about the defining work of finding one’s voice.

The word kismet is defined as a predetermined course of events, destiny or fate. I have to think there was a little of that going on with the two “signs” I’d had prior to the interview with Mike Jewell.

Also in its eleventh year, Kismet Rock Foundation spent several years as an idea in Mike’s head before becoming a reality. A full-time technical climbing guide, Mike asked a childhood friend from New Jersey if he knew of four kids who might like to come to the White Mountain region of New Hampshire for one week of climbing instruction but didn’t have the financial means to do so. During the summer of 1999, with very little money and a great deal of effort and generosity from others, Mike’s idea came to fruition. The project received media attention, including airing on “New Hampshire Crossroads,” and members of the community approached Mike with the idea of starting a nonprofit organization. And so it was that Kismet began in 2000 with a small board of six and the support of many friends and other organizations. Since then, as Mike puts it, “Kismet has determined its own existence.”

Climbing naturally builds self worth by requiring the application of all



“...After Kismet, I’ve noticed that my patience has widely increased and now I can communicate with people a lot easier. For example, in school the other day, we did this little game where we had to communicate a sentence but we had to make sure the sentence was short, and I was one of the few who were able to pull it off. I think the communications we learned at Kismet. Like when we had slack, ‘Joshi, up rope!’”

aspects of one’s being—physical, mental and emotional. It teaches interpersonal responsibility; students are taught to assess what and who is trustworthy and how to fix what is not trustworthy. It demands the development and use of good judgement and requires focus and presence of being; “note your intuition but verify through analysis.” Technical climbing can build the courage to persevere through extraordinary challenges, but it cannot be learned in one week. Therefore, if students are good Kismet citizens and interested in climbing, they are invited to return yearly.

Kismet Rock Foundation invites qualifying students for comprehensive courses in rock climbing and mountaineering in seven, one-week programs of instruction during the summer months. Students from grade six and up are selected from six serving schools in Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Being selected as a scholarship recipient is no small feat. Students who wouldn’t otherwise have access to an education in technical climbing due to economic and cultural factors are invited to attend a presentation on the Kismet program. If, after attending the presentation, they are interested in taking part in the program, they must submit an application and are then interviewed. The next determinant of whether or not the program is right for them occurs when invitees bring the permission slip home for parents or guardians to sign. They naturally undergo an examination or interview process with themselves and their parents to determine if they’re a good fit. Finally, the fifth of Kismet’s five-filter selection process is the first year in the program. There’s nothing like experience to determine who is a good Kismet citizen.

When asked what kind of impact the program has on kids, Mike says that almost all of them point to it as one of the most important things in their lives. Almost all beg to come back for the four years. Many of them speak of how transformational it has been for them.

King Middle School and Portland High School are the current serving schools in Maine. Portland High has been involved with the program for the past three years, and it’s been a very positive association. For one thing, PHS administrators have worked to raise the school’s standards and have become quite selective about which outside organizations they will involve themselves with. The fact that they approved Kismet says a lot about the organization. Additionally, southern Maine has seen a significant influx of immigrants in recent years, and it has resulted in a culturally diverse student base. One of the things

A ninth-grader at Portland High School, Francesca has taken part in the program these past two summers. Bright, articulate and enthusiastic are three words that spring to mind in talking with her.

When asked about her involvement with KRF she said, “It’s been an extraordinary growing experience. I’ve gained a lot of self-confidence, knowing that I can put myself through scary situations. I feel like I’ve grown a lot through this program.

When I first found out about the program I was a little afraid. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to

that is most remarkable about Kismet is the relationships that grow out of it. Because of the personal character of climbing bonds, students of various backgrounds quickly learn to reach across boundaries of race and differing social experience. The compassion and consideration required to sustain a stable climbing partnership offers an opportunity to gain empathy and understanding for others.

Kismet offers its students full scholarships that cover all their expenses while at Kismet, including instruction, food, transportation during the program, live-in staff, and even evening activities. A formalized internship program that brings former students in to act as liaison between staff and current students provides a really nice connection for both past and present participants.

Fifty percent of the funding for Kismet comes from private family foundations in the form of grants and endowments. The other half comes from individuals, businesses and fundraising events, such as Caliente!, an annual event that features a silent auction and evening of salsa dancing. Mike is also quick to credit the local climbing community for their steadfast and generous financial support. If you would like to lend your support to the Kismet Rock Foundation, the best and easiest way to do so is by visiting them on the Web at www.kismetrockfoundation.org and clicking on “Join Us” for levels of giving.

Note: Since writing this piece about KRF, I had the chance to read Breaking Night, a memoir by Elizabeth Murray (a review of the book appears on page 17), and am convinced I’ve stumbled upon the third sign. Kismet rocks.

handle heights, but everyone was so supportive. They wouldn’t make you do anything you felt you couldn’t do, but they’re there to help you broaden your thoughts about what you can do.

It’s more about learning about yourself, in my opinion. It’s more about gaining self-confidence. I feel like I have gained a lot of confidence, and it has also shown me there are more opportunities out there

that I could take advantage of. It’s a huge growing experience. I had an awesome time. It’s tremendous!”

