

THE LINK SCHOOL

Buena Vista, Colorado



“Our students just can’t fall between the cracks.” **Natalie Lewis – The Link School Administrator**

“Life should be meaningful now, not just someday in the future.” **Bobby Lewis – Director of The Link School**

Marv: I am visiting with my neighbor Natalie Lewis. Natalie and Bobby Lewis, her husband, were the driving force to found and establish Link School. I’ve asked Natalie & Bobby to share how The Link School came about and when it went from their dream to reality.

Natalie: Well, my husband, Bobby, was able to go to an alternative school his senior year. Bobby had had some struggles in school and the alternative program made a huge difference in his life. He checked his journal recently and he had been thinking about establishing a school for over 20 years. “I’d like to start a school someday,” was the entry. So he went on with his life and became the director of “Adventures Unlimited,” a youth camp, here at Buena Vista. Every year he & I would hear comments from parents, “I wish our camper could stay year round, because they do so well.” Often, these young folks would slip back into some problem behaviors when they got home. We felt it was up to us, if an alternative school was going to happen.

Marv: I’m familiar with “Dakota Boys Ranch,” near Minot, N.Dak. That school made a difference and changed some young people’s lives.

Natalie: Yeah, I agree. So what we really wanted to do was have a program that contained all of the elements of camp but had the traditional school classes that were accredited as a college prep school. We also wanted additions to this, such as backpacking, horseback riding, rafting, etc. The creation of the Link School has allowed us to integrate these various elements into a life changing experience.

It’s really a lot of fun, as an example, to be able have “Construction Math,” as one of the courses. The students helped figure out the concrete yardage needed when new construction was added to the school.

Marv: Our second son is back in school and when he is in the field doing surveying, the practical aspects of his math courses make sense & are applied.

Natalie: Well it makes it so that for the first time in many of these kids’ lives there is a reason for them to be learning what they’re learning.

Marv: I’m assuming besides the structure and discipline there’s a personal pride that’s built as well. This may be something that they may be struggling with when they come.

Natalie: For sure.

Marv: How many students do you have?

Natalie: Thirteen and that's full capacity.

Marv: And the teaching staff?

Natalie: We have eight. We have six that are full time and two are part time. The staff lives at the school.

Marv: What are some of the results that you see? I am sure there is evidence of their growth while they're here. Do you get any feedback both ways, while they're here and after they leave?

Natalie: Yeah, we do. We have to do more investigation on the students that leave, there's only been two years of students that have left, this being our third year. The kinds of comments we get from parents are that they are more helpful when they get home. I guess the biggest thing that we see while they're here is, "Our students just can't fall between the cracks," there's just aren't any cracks. There are thirteen of them and six of us. So because of the kind of program that we run, they find out that their impact on the school community matters, the effect that they have on other people matters, we spend a lot of time talking & having then think about what impact they want to have so that they are aware of the effects that they don't like. Therefore; "I will have to change how I think & what I do." "I'm not in a vacuum."

Marv: I'm assuming that the understanding of personal responsibility that they come away with is something that they haven't thought about before.

Natalie: It really is, in today's society where everything is available; it's easy not to be needed. You don't have to make your bed, you don't have to be nice to everybody at school because there are 2000 students. We are able to create a different reality here. You really need to be nice because there are only twelve other people.

Marv: You're stuck with 'em.

Natalie: Right!

Marv: I'm sure in the field, sometimes, your dependent.

Natalie: Oh, absolutely. That's a really big one to be able to go out on a trip. Working together as a boat team for example, if somebody is mad and they're not pulling their weight they're going to hear about it from everybody else in the boat. That makes a huge impact.

Marv: Talk a little about your setting here in the west, this beautiful valley and some of the greatest peaks in the world. How do you think that makes the teaching climate different.

Natalie: I think the kind of things you can do around here to play, really cater to the skills that Bobby and I have in terms of different accreditations, credentials & the kinds of interests that we have and enjoy doing.

Marv: You know that sounds fantastic & is but I think of the liability that goes along with it and the personal responsibility that you folks have.

Natalie: Yeah, I mean that can be a positive or a negative. It's a negative, in that that is a responsibility we are constantly aware of however, it's a positive in that, as you're interacting with the students it's not fake that when you tell 'em and they're not paying attention, the outcome is for real. There can be serious consequences for not doing a job.

Marv: I experienced life and death daily, growing up on a farm. I think that our young people today have been shielded from that reality. Out here, in the wild, you see life and death all the time.

Bobby Lewis joins our conversation

Marv: Hey Bobby, glad you could join us, we're talking...finding out about the school. Natalie, thanks so much, I know you have to get back to work. Thanks.

Bobby: Thanks for coming. In response to your comments about life and death, we're not trying to put students at risk but, this is different than a game. When you are trying to get safely across a river, in the midst of rapids, you can learn from that and you don't have to explain to the students why it matters. Their own wellbeing is dependent upon the application of the skills they've learned and how they watch out for each other. It all is real. What we've found is that when their experiences are real, whether their preparing dinner or making decisions about how to run a rapids, that they feel really needed. A lot of kids have their school life and their REAL life. So their behaviors are trying to make life feel real. Our hope is that here their life is real and they can be learning from those things. So what they learn in class can be integrated, rather than going out and driving fast or drinking or whatever it takes to feel life's reality.

Marv: I'm assuming there's a spiritual aspect to their experience here, as well.

Bobby: Certainly. The academics, the program, the chores, the cooking and all that we're doing, are towards the idea that they can "Discover true identity and the source of that in terms of their relationship with God." That they'll leave high school for life, understanding who they are and where that comes from, then life is a process of living and refining that.

Marv: The life experience includes God, in my view.

Bobby: Yeah.

Marv: Let's talk about the school's future for a moment. Where are you folks headed?

Bobby: We don't have growth plans. Our mission is to help a few kids a year. We are happy to help other schools get started however, we feel the concept of smaller schools with an intimate setting, is a sound one. Having an environment where the staff and students really work together. I think that being able to help certain students turn the corner in their life is key. We are not interested in growing the school or franchising it. Natalie and I have had some years of management that we loved but our hearts are here, working with students. So six staff & 13-14 kids that's where we're going.

Marv: Well, I know from the various charitable involvements that I have, the thing that is not measured is the value of the individual and their contribution to the future. Boy, we're dependent on these young people for the future of the world. They need to hear that too.

Bobby: I think here the kids daily hear and see that they are of value and are needed. Not just some day but now. The ability to transfer that to life beyond high school is an understanding that many students in a typical school setting don't have. Life should be meaningful now not just some day in the future. These skills will allow our students to make life even more meaningful in the future.

Marv: We all need role models. How do you deal with role modeling for both the male and female students?

Bobby: We have a balance of staff and enrollment. I think kids have got to figure out how to be in day-to-day relationship with each other, rather than the idea of, "You keep them separate until

they're eighteen or nineteen than they will understand." By doing things together they are able to figure out how to be friends and supportive of each other. There is no prohibition against dating but they are taught that social relationships involve a lot more than dating.

Marv: Exactly, and the responsibilities of relationships.

Marv: Well, this has been fantastic. I've said for the last three years, "I've got to come up and see Bob & Natalie and find out what's going on." I'm so proud of you folks and what you're doing. The personal commitment and sacrifice you've made, and the fact that you're making a difference with the Link School.
Thanks again!

Check out the "The Link School" website at www.thelinkschool.org