

The Spartacus Program: An alternative to jailing youth

AS I SEE IT

By Michael E. Donnelly

In 1973 I came to Worcester to run the Spartacus Program, a mountain climbing and wilderness survival program for youth at risk based on the international Outward Bound Schools. I was a former student at Colorado Outward Bound and at the Gordonstoun School in Scotland. Gordonstoun was the place up on the north coast of Scotland where Kurt Hahn, a German schoolmaster and early opponent of Adolf Hitler, had fled just before the outbreak of World War II. There Hahn developed a unique wilderness survival school that was credited with saving the lives of many British sailors whose ships had been torpedoed by Nazi submarines. After the war, Outward Bound became a highly successful program around the world, training the first American Peace Corps volunteers and providing support for young people and later adults struggling to overcome various personal challenges, including drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. For these reasons, a group of informed community leaders started the Spartacus program, based on Outward Bound, for young people in Worcester.

My work with Spartacus lasted three years, but in that time we expanded our mountain climbing training to include young women, as well as young men. We provided students with credit from the Worcester Public Schools for time spent climbing and away from their classrooms, and we included a follow-up program that helped students navigate their way through the challenges of school, family and jobs.

Now, 35 years later, thanks to the staff and leaders of the YMCA of Central Massachusetts and the Worcester Juvenile Court, Spartacus is still in operation and doing a superb job of providing outdoor challenges, as well as leadership training, to young people, many of whom are referred to the program through an agreement with the Worcester Juvenile Court.

The YMCA has done an extraordinary job giving each student a free membership to the YMCA and close support and mentoring here in the city.

I am back now as an adviser to Spartacus, and I am proud of the YMCA, the Worcester Juvenile Court and, in particular, the young men and women of Worcester who are attending Spartacus. This special effort is a wise alternative to incarceration that puts opportunity and responsibility where it belongs: In the hands of young people who have entered the Juvenile Court system.

As the commonwealth struggles with how best to respond to the needs of young people during the difficult years of growing up, the young people of Worcester's Spartacus Program and those other young people, those young British sailors struggling to stay alive in time of war, can teach us a great deal.

Michael Edmond Donnelly of Paxton, a former assistant district attorney, is director of Anna Maria College's master's in public administration program.



My work with Spartacus lasted three years, but in that time we expanded our mountain climbing training to include young women, as well as young men, as students.