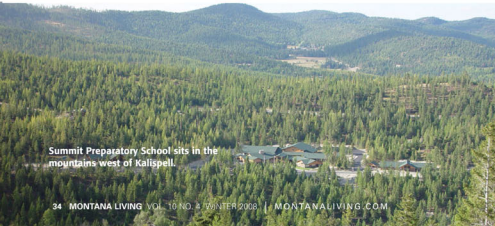




The school offers amenities such as an indoor swimming pool, gymnasium and climbing wall.



Spanish teacher Amy Borgen gives a lesson.



Summit Preparatory School sits in the mountains west of Kalspell.

Summit opened in 2003. Rick Johnson and Alex Habibi were college roommates who had always dreamed of creating a program to help struggling adolescents. Building the school was a huge risk. Since most students arrive in a crisis situation, the school didn't have an established client list. Summit had the academic and clinical structures in place, just no students — yet. "You have to build it first," Rick Johnson said.

The students at Summit Preparatory School stay as long as they need. The typical stay is about 15 months, though some students stay as long as two years. Most students graduate high school and transition to college, while younger students move on to a traditional or private high school.

Johnson and his partners decided to start the school after managed health care drastically changed the way adolescents received treatment. Managed care, Johnson said, led to the demise of longer-term adolescent treatment, and shifted the focus to treating only acute medical issues in adolescents, "and this meant you no longer had time to work with kids," Johnson said.

He had run a hospital clinical program in Illinois before becoming director of psychiatry services at St. Patrick Hospital in Missoula. He was hired to be the first administrator at Pathways Treatment Center in Kalspell when Kalspell Regional Hospital purchased the operation about a decade ago.

Now in its sixth year, Summit Preparatory School is the only therapeutic boarding school in Montana that is accredited by the Montana Office of Public Instruction. Parents are a vital part of the students' success, and parental involvement is encouraged throughout the process. This includes clinical therapy sessions with the parents and their children. Students at Summit are part of teams that live, eat, and recreate together. In many ways, the team concept resembles a family.

"It isn't just compliance with program rules, it's about forming healthy relationships," Rick Johnson said. The same-sex teams of eight to 10 students help the adolescents work on their personal identity. "Co-ed activities help kids to learn how to be friends with members of the opposite sex," Johnson said. Although the campus is co-educational, co-ed interactions are supervised.

The clinical method of counseling and structure at Summit was revamped two years ago. Johnson wanted to move away from the outdated model of not giving students freedom until they earn it, to a model of building relationships. "Now, we use engaging activities to form those relationships as soon as students arrive," Johnson said. "The best way to boost self esteem and confidence in a child is to build on what they're passionate about."

**FOR NATALIE**, now 16, the curriculum and lifestyle at Summit have helped her become a better person. "I was out of control," she said, adding that she'd "probably be dead" if she had remained in California and maintained her unhealthy

'My reason for coming here was to learn how to have healthy relationships and friendships. I've learned how to communicate and tell people how I feel.'

—Olivia, a student at Summit Preparatory School in Kalspell

lifestyle. She'll return to her junior year in high school in California as a much different person. She sees herself returning there and doing community service work, like volunteering at the Humane Society or Habitat for Humanity. While at Summit,

Natalie and her team devised a jewelry business with profits going to a battered-women's shelter.

Olivia is another success story. She's a soft-spoken, 15-year-old from California. Living in Montana without connection to the outside world was a shock, as was dealing with the weather. "Not having a cell phone or computer teaches you how to talk to people and make your own fun," she said.

The school has advantages in being remote; students don't have easy access to distractions, and the disconnection from their electronic devices forces them into dialogue with others. "Kids nowadays sleep with their cell phones and iPods," Rick Johnson said. "They're never out of touch."

Required dialogue with others actually helps the students develop a sense of self that doesn't always occur when a child is withdrawn into themselves or their electronic devices. "These distractions inhibit identity development," Johnson said. "This is huge."

Parents are part of the solution here. "We help parents reconnect with their child and create healthy structure within the family," Johnson said.

The style of teaching and counseling at Summit showed her a new outlook on life. "My reason for coming here was to learn how to have healthy relationships and friendships," Olivia said. "I've learned how to communicate and tell people how I feel. I



Biology teacher Damian Espares helps students dissect a cat at Summit Preparatory School.



Jan Johnson, left, and husband, Rick Johnson, helped found the Summit Preparatory School.