

Homework, Happiness, Opportunity

South Wasco Youth Programs creates possibilities

By Drew Myron

Anyone who wonders if they can really make a difference should look to Amber Anderson. The Maupin self-starter noticed a lack of extracurricular activities for local children. With limited money and experience, she created a youth program that has won hearts, minds and trophies.

Founded in 2013, South Wasco Youth Programs began with a modest schedule of after-school activities. It has grown to include a robust slate of field trips, summer day camps, and lively science, tech, engineering and math lessons.

Based in Maupin, the organization serves rural, under-resourced communities throughout south Wasco County, encompassing a 90-mile radius that reaches from Warm Springs to Shaniko, Tygh Valley and Wamic.

SWYP is independent of the school system and serves as the area's only organization offering academic-based extracurricular programs.

"We have tried to fill the gap and offer a wide array of activities and expose the kids to different things in life they may not get in school," Amber explains. "I put together the first summer day camp in this area, and it continued to snowball from there into more programs and activities.

"This is an isolated area. We're 50 miles from any city. We're offering things these kids are not going to get anywhere else."

This summer, for example, day camps are packed with field trips that include kayaking the Columbia River, geode hunting at Richardson Rock Ranch and



South Wasco Youth Programs is driven by a one-woman dynamo: Amber Anderson, a hands-on leader working hard to provide youth a sense of possibility. PHOTO BY DREW MYRON

riding the Columbia Gorge Sternwheeler.

SWYP also offers low-cost swim lessons with free transportation to the nearest swimming pool 47 miles away in Madras.

SWYP serves students in kindergarten through junior high. All activities are provided at a low cost, and scholarships are available for those who are financially stretched. No child is turned away, and every activity includes snacks or meals.

Tuition and operating expenses are covered by private donations, foundations, grants and community fundraisers.

Initially, Amber had no financial backing. She dug into her own reserves to cover programs costs.

"It was tough in the beginning," she says.

"It took a lot of trial and error."

The organization is now on sound footing with support from United Way, Oregon Community Foundation and Ford Family Foundation, along with some private donations and city support.

SWYP has increased programs, hired teachers and assistants, bought transportation vans, and secured a permanent space in Maupin along Highway 197, just before the bridge crosses the Deschutes River.

Amber is a hands-on leader who creates curriculum, leads lessons, raises money, promotes programs, makes lunches, drives the van, cleans bathrooms and more.

She didn't set out to spend her days with



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: SWYP's STEM Club won first place in the 2019 Destination ImagiNation state competition. Summer camps, including trips for swim lessons, are offered at low to no cost, and no child is turned away due to finances. Anna Marie Grady expresses her inner Van Gogh. SWYP activities are academic-based and art-infused.



youngsters. Her professional background is in retail management. She worked nearly two decades for The Container Store at its corporate headquarters in Dallas, Texas.

Though not trained as a teacher, Amber has spent much of her life researching brain function and how to successfully engage and educate young minds. Her son, now 30, was born with special needs. Amber spent years searching for educational practices and programs that would best help him engage and succeed.

In 2013, following the deaths of her father and sister, Amber left Texas and headed west.

"I kinda started my whole life over," she says. "Moving to Maupin was an intuitive jump."

That leap has benefited hundreds of children and their parents.

"I'm so impressed with the curriculum," says Lisa Garner, who assisted in the after-school program and works as a secretary for the school district. "It could be something as simple as painting, but then she draws on her knowledge to teach the kids about Van Gogh or Matisse so they are introduced to things they may have never

learned or learned not until much later in life. She looks at every child holistically, incorporating all aspects into each activity."

Activities are academic-based and art-infused, with literacy a core component of every lesson. A strong curriculum is paired with a keen perception of each child's mental, emotional and scholastic needs.

Amber serves as mentor to many, intuitively sensing the student who needs attention, calming or affirmation.

"I try to support and encourage the students by seeing what they're good at and cultivating that part of them," she says.

That whole-person approach earned accolades in 2019 when SWYP's STEM Club won first place in the state-level Destination ImagiNation competition and qualified to participate in the global finals. The annual event draws 100,000 students from 30 countries as teams of students rise to challenges that emphasize creativity, teamwork and problem-solving.

The SWYP team, comprised of six girls ages 10 to 13, earned first place in the Oregon competition. Their award-winning project involved creating bonds with community elders through art projects at

Canyon Rim Senior Living in Maupin.

The winning team traveled to Kansas City for the international event.

"Some of the kids had never been out of the state and had never been on an airplane," Amber says. "It was a great accomplishment."

While the trophy still shines, for Amber the ultimate prize is seeing every student experience a sense of possibility.

"It's important to broaden their horizons so they know there's a wonderful huge world out there, full of opportunity," she says. ■

For more information on South Wasco Youth Programs, contact Director Amber Anderson at swyouthprograms@gmail.com or 541-705-5833, or search for South Wasco Youth Programs on Facebook.