

Academy offers kids a new start

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For Pam Easterling, Sandhills Alternative Academy is a dream come true.

For students, it can be a new beginning.

While the main academy facility is on East Broad Avenue in Rockingham, an off-campus site is being developed on an old recreational area north of Hamlet.

Rep. Larry Kissell (D-N.C.-8), an educator before being elected Congressman, expressed his interest Wednesday morning on a tour of the facilities under renovation.

He said the Instructional and Recreational Facility for Sandhills Alternative Academy is reminiscent of the old hunting preserves which the wealthy set up throughout the Carolinas in the early part of the 20th century.

His wife, Tina, is on the board of directors of a similar program with Eckerd Family Youth Alternatives Therapeutic Wilderness Camp in North Carolina.

Easterling said the academy is loosely patterned after that camp.

Kissell offered encouragement to students and hoped they appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the academy. He said he wanted to return in the future to spend more time with them.

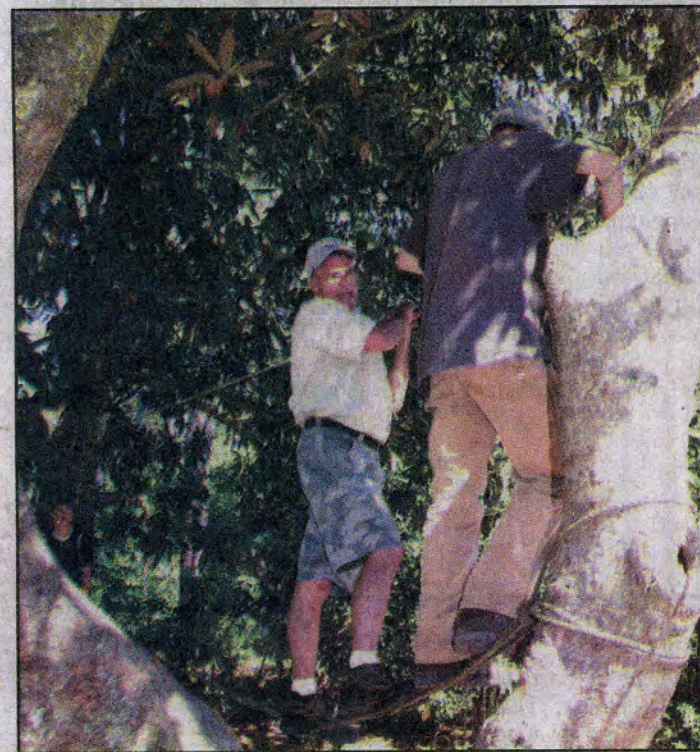
Students presented him with a bluebird box they made for him. He said he lived in an area with a lot of wildlife where it would be put to good use.

The beginning

She and her brother, Joseph Roger Boone, now a retired 1st sergeant, U.S. Army Special Forces, years ago operated a wilderness camp along Hitchcock Creek south of Rockingham. He is now an instructor at the academy. She is owner and program director.

It was a prelude to what they have today.

The academy "wilderness" site north of Hamlet is at the old Corning Lodge, or Buttercup Ice Cream recreational site developed in the late 1930s or early 1940s. Easterling said they are continuing to look for historical infor-



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Rep. Larry Kissell (D-N.C.-8), (top photo, center) accepts a bluebird house made by students at the Sandhills Alternative Academy when he visited with them Wednesday morning at the academy's retreat north of Hamlet. Students attending the academy have shown an interest in improving the facilities where they spend time with hands-on education and learn skills.

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mation about the site.

With the development of a "ropes course," the site will take on a dual purpose, one for the academy and one for general public use in a challenging outdoor personal development and team-building activity.

Academy

The way the academy is licensed, it provides 50 percent of a student's day off-site at the camp site or in shadowing workers in local businesses to learn about employment opportunities.

Students at the academy, Easterling told Kissell, are referred to her facility by a variety of sources.

The number of students is limited. She said the idea was to prepare them as soon as possible to adjust to re-enter the regular school system to make room for new students. If not, they are prepared to be able to study to obtain a GED.

Students are grouped as boys and girls ages six to nine of which there are eight at a time; 12 girls 10 to 14 years of age; and 15 boys ages 10 to 15.

There is one certified adult on staff for each six students.

The academy was licensed by the State Board of Health and Human Services in January 2008 and endorsed by Sandhills Mental Health which enabled them to receive funds from Medicaid and Health Choice Insurance. The program began in July 2008.

Treatment services

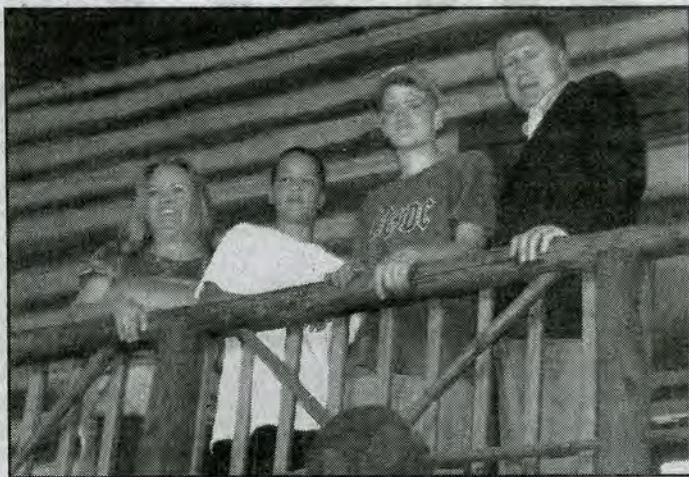
The academy is designed for day treatment services for children and adolescents.

Easterling said they purchase end-of-grade testing material directly from the N.C. Department of Instruction. The results are accepted by the state and Richmond County Schools for placement of returning students.

The educational program differs in many ways from the public schools especially because it operates 12 months of the year from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. weekdays. The staff of 12 includes three certified school teachers.

Easterling said the academy is nationally certified by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities. She said the standards for certification keep them focused on performance improvement and customer satisfaction.

She said certification was



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Pam Easterling of Sandhills Alternative Academy, left, shows Rep. Larry Kissell (D-N.C.-8) around the Academy's retreat north of Hamlet Wednesday morning and introduces him to students attending.

important to maintain the confidence of the agencies which fund the program.

Lunch is provided, and periodically students go to eat out at restaurants as part of their social skills development.

Richmond County Schools offer homebound educational services for students unable to attend regular school sessions. When that is not an option for parents, the academy offers a structured learning environment, Easterling said.

Opportunities

In addition to the facility north of Hamlet and shadowing employment opportunities, some students this summer are invited to go to the East Rockingham Diggs Park swimming pool for their afternoon session.

Swimming in a pond is available at the Hamlet area site as well. The academy has certified lifeguards among the staff available whenever students are swimming at either location, she said.

The off-site experiences include a lot of hands-on work, Easterling said. Students are being taught life skills using the academic information obtained in classrooms and applied to practical matters in the field.

Students attending may include out-of-county students with some recently from Moore and Montgomery counties.

The academy has three vans to take students from place to place.

Easterling has an undergraduate degree in sociology and 15 years of experience in the mental health field. She has a master's degree in public management.

Besides her staff, the academy draws on professionals in the mental health field to

assist with individual testing and designing of programs for students.

She said the goal of their approach is to teach students personal responsibility for their own learning process.

"We want them to leave with a renewed sense of hope and enthusiasm for the learning and working process," she said. In doing so, she said they should be able to go on to other learning and working environments with groundwork for continued growth.

Historic location

The old hunting site remains much as it was in the early 20th century with its log structures.

One main building burned and is the location for the ropes course now under construction which will feature a "rock climbing" wall, zip line across the pond and other stations for confidence building.

Once constructed, staff members with Lee Jenkins as ropes course facilitator will undergo three weeks of training to be able to take people through the course.

A lodge, shop, carriage house and maid's quarters are still in much of their original condition.

Work is being done to upgrade those facilities so the camp can qualify for a bed and breakfast permit for overnight stays by groups. When ready, it will be open for public group use.

Easterling said they are beginning to get requests for use of the facility for retreats. People have also held weddings at the site, although not part of her plan. They were booked before she took possession of the property.

"It will be available for day trips as well," she said.