

## Taking New Paths: Experiential Education in Portugal

by *Kátia Almeida*

### About Pressley Ridge

Pressley Ridge provides an array of treatment services to at-risk and developmentally delayed children that allow them to remain close to their families and communities. A non-profit organization founded in 1832, Pressley Ridge offers innovative programs in Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia. Pressley Ridge also provides services in Hungary and Portugal. Together, the programs in the US and Europe serve approximately 2,000 children and families daily.

Pressley Ridge has operated in Portugal for about 20 years providing training, consultation and technical assistance. Since 2004 with the achievement of NGO status (non-governmental organization for psychosocial intervention with children, youth and families), Pressley Ridge has expanded its mission to include direct service provision to at-risk children and families.

### Experiential Education in Portugal

At Pressley Ridge we brought experiential education to Portugal to enhance our work with children by integrating the main components of learning by doing into our daily activities. This approach began in 1996 with summer and winter camps for at-risk youth and expanded to an after-school program for a group of 40 primary school children in 2000.

In Portugal, professionals use group games in different settings (schools, residential programs, outdoor adventure-based programs). Typically these games are used for recreational or educational purposes. Rarely do we see professionals using these group games or adventure-based activities for therapeutic ends.

In order to train more professionals in the experiential education philosophy, in 2001 I started an experiential education class in the Sports Psychology Department of Lusófona University (a private university located in Lisbon). It was the first time anywhere in Portugal that students majoring in sports psychology were offered this course; it ran every year until 2007.

### Lack of Wilderness

Compared to most countries in North and South America, Europe does not have expansive wilderness areas; the real wilderness in Portugal is the ocean. Our natural parks are very small and you cannot be in the outdoors for long without encountering evidence of human habitation: a ruin, an olive tree, a Roman walk or wall.

When we integrate outdoor and adventure-based components in our programs in Portugal, we try to use the best of what we have to offer. We have medieval villages and centuries-old castle ruins that are almost always located at the top of beautiful mountains in the countryside. We try to use this beautiful landscape to set up adventure courses that will enable participants to explore cultural components of the country while at the same time exploring nature.

I've learned that, regardless of where we are in the world, we can always find beautiful places and suitable locations that will help us feel close to nature and teach us more about ourselves and others. The key is to be away from our daily lives and allow ourselves to be challenged to get out of our comfort zones. These same principles apply to all locations. We discovered this one day when we went into a fire house to escape the rain and conducted a very successful experiential education training.

## Experiential Education and Adventure Therapy Centre

In 2007 Pressley Ridge Portugal started an experiential education and adventure therapy center. This pilot project aims to help participants change their behaviour (functional and dysfunctional) and manage their emotions. The target population is at-risk youth and families from a variety of settings (public schools, residential and community-based programs, and probation services) and the professionals that work with them.

The main goals of the program are to

- separate youth from the negative influences in their daily lives and place them in challenging but safe environments where they must communicate, cooperate and work as a team and, as a consequence, improve their behaviour and learn new skills
- help participants understand their pattern of self-defeating behaviour and learn new and effective coping skills
- promote therapeutic change through experiential learning, Challenge by Choice and group process activities
- provide training in experiential education and adventure therapy for professionals.

The centre offers various programs to achieve these goals:

### 1. The training program

Since June 2007 we've organized three different trainings and trained 65 professionals (school teachers, teacher counsellors from a Juvenile Justice residential program, psychologists and social workers). Two of these trainings were basic facilitation courses and the other was a professional and personal development training. The trainings were held amidst beautiful Portuguese landscapes and the participants stayed together in groups for two-and-a-half days.

Some of these professionals continue to work with us in our community-based programs, integrating what they've learned in their daily activities with youth and families. As a result, our staff is more motivated, empowered and

more willing to accept and integrate new challenges.

This year, we have scheduled a four-and-a-half day adventure orienteering experience, two one-day trainings on the use of metaphors to enhance learning, and two basic facilitation courses.

### 2. Wilderness therapy

We are developing short-term adventure-based residential programs (from one to 20 days in length) to work with at-risk youth in an outdoor setting. To that end we are in the process of contracting with an agency located in Sintra National Park outside of Lisbon that has an outdoor adventure-based camp with challenge courses, eco-cabins, a camping site and orienteering courses.

### 3. Adventure therapy and experiential education

We are developing a model to integrate experiential education in public schools and residential programs as a way of teaching interpersonal and social skills to at-risk students, and as a result, increasing their attendance and improving their behaviour in these settings.

Evidenced by what we have done in the past and our plans for the future, we are committed to improve the lives of the young people we serve and to help more professionals in Portugal integrate experiential education methods into their work.

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