

BRINK

Oregon Community Foundation
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Title: Giving Youth a Second Chance at J Bar J

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Copy: Last fall, I was touring the J Bar J Boys Ranch in northeast Bend, which houses young men ages 13 to 18 who have experienced legal trouble and are at risk of anti-social behaviors. During my tour, I stumbled upon the kitchen, where a young man was diligently preparing the evening's meal prior to joining us to showcase the rest of the facility. Before leaving the room, I noticed that he made sure to clean thoroughly and pack up his workspace.

The move was a simple one, but it struck me: here was a boy who, perhaps just weeks prior, wouldn't have even considered doing chores. And here he was, not only preparing an entire meal but making sure to tidy up when he was done.

The interaction perfectly encapsulates the massive transformation young men on the Ranch experience during their time in the program, which since 1968 has taught its residents to understand the origins of their self-defeating behaviors, and has provided them with structure that helps them view the world and their place in it rationally.

While the young men at the Ranch are intelligent and eager to learn new skills, they come from low-income, underserved families and communities that are too often hindered by what's known as the "opportunity gap" – the chronic lack of educational and employment opportunities that plagues Oregon's low-income children, children of color and rural children.

Too often, the lack of opportunity and access to jobs and educational programs results in young people making critical early mistakes that too often land them in legal trouble. And yet when young men are referred to J Bar J by the Oregon Youth Authority, they are lucky enough to

experience a program that teaches individual accountability and personal growth. This gives them the ability to change the way they think about their lives, and then use that information to change their behavior.

But behavior change alone doesn't always prepare residents for their reentry into society. For many Ranch graduates, more support is needed to help them make the transition to the workforce and close their personal opportunity gap.

Thankfully, some of that support is on the way.

Months after my tour, I was back at the Ranch, this time standing in the biting December air to witness the groundbreaking of the J Bar J Boys Ranch Vocational School, a new building at the Ranch intended to house hands-on vocational programs, from woodworking to electrical skills to drone development, for the young men at the Ranch. Generous donations from The Bend Foundation, Oregon Community Foundation, local Rotary Clubs and individual donors like myself helped fund the new vocational school, which will serve as an enhancement to the Ranch's current educational programs and expose youth to various types of trades they may be interested in that will enrich their lives as adults.

The school's focus on the skilled trades doesn't just help these young men—it's also key to solving one of Central Oregon's most pressing economic concerns: while housing and construction in the region is booming, the numbers of local workers in the building trades is at an all-time low. By combining rehabilitation and trade skill development in one program, the J Bar J Boys Ranch is creating a new model that can be adapted by other communities to help create a better future for both at-risk youth and the local economy.

Don Smith previously served on the J Bar J Board of Directors and is currently enjoying retired life in Bend.