



Kismet Rock Foundation

Providing Children A Chance to Become ...

by Deb Dunn

What happens when you take the kernel of an idea, plant it, nurture it, and watch it grow in ways you never imagined? You discover that the idea can profoundly impact young lives. With playfully sparkling eyes that shine with the knowing of a deep thinker, Mike Jewell, founder of Kismet Rock Foundation (Kismet), talks about that kernel of an idea and why and how he planted it 25 years ago.

With years of experience as a professional rock-climbing guide, by 1999, Mike had taught scores

and learning together.

Sharlah-Mae Day is a past student and current summer intern for Kismet. As a testament to the fruits of Mike's vision, she shares the profound impact this experience had on her. "I was so scared to climb, but Mike said, 'This is just about you. You have to trust yourself.' That was a big thing for me. In middle school, everyone is comparing themselves to each other. I was hesitant to do things and was used to lots of negative self-talk. All of that didn't matter at Kismet. Mike's message really

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of children how to climb. Most of them came from families with considerable resources. But that year, he identified a strong desire to cast the net much wider and bring climbing to children who didn't have the same resources. Specifically, New England urban and rural youth were on the precipice of those formative teen years. As most adults may remember, this can be an especially challenging and often confusing time of life. Mike wanted to create a unique and intentional opportunity for children to find out who they really are and have a chance to become who they want to be. The essence is to recognize that children are "not an empty vessel to fill," and by nurturing their development in the world and with others in the world, we give them "the freedom to become" so that they can experience a journey to self and have a chance to find love and connection. With the support of the North Conway community, Mike created Kismet—a school for doing

resonated with me. As my relationships with peers in my group grew, and as my trust of the staff grew, and as I trusted myself more, my confidence skyrocketed!"

Kismet Mission and How it Works

The Kismet mission is built on core guiding principles, known as pillars.

PILLAR #1: THE CHILDREN WE SERVE

Over the past 25 years, Kismet has developed relationships with nine public schools in NH, MA, and ME. Seventh graders are recommended for Kismet, and if the student expresses interest after hearing a presentation by a Kismet staff member, they apply and are interviewed. This is one of the many aspects differentiating Kismet from a traditional camp program. And true to the organization's name, as Caleb Scott, a Kismet alumnus and current summer counselor and mentor, says,



“I like to tell kids that we chose them. They are not there randomly. We want you here, which is different from parents sending kids off to summer camp.” Ricardo D., another alumnus, shares, “I wasn’t sure why they ever gave me a chance, but they did. Somehow, they believed in me more than I did.”

Selected students are invited to attend one week every summer for four years at no cost. There are seven weeks of the program this year, building to eight weeks next year beginning June 30, and each cohort includes eight to nine kids. Student cohorts remain the same for the duration of the program, allowing for the deepening of relationships and a sense of community. For some participants, Kismet is their first experience spending a week away from home, and that can create excitement and nervousness. As Caleb reflects, “It was the first time I had direct interaction with people with different skin color, religious, and political beliefs [and it gave me] a taste of what the world offers.” Caleb’s experience impacted where he chose to attend college. “I chose a school to get more diversity and different perspectives intentionally,” he says.

Kismet embraces and encourages opportunities for past participants to become staff and mentors. Of her upcoming summer internship, Sharlah-Mae says, “I want to meet all of the amazing kids. I want to help create a space that allows them to be themselves and ensures everyone is respected. I look forward to helping them through scary times, validating

curriculum. As Caleb recalls, “Mike Jewell emphasized the school part.” In line with his philosophy that children should have the freedom to become, and unlike camp programs where the instructor does everything for the children, the Kismet four-year curriculum teaches the children every aspect of technical rock climbing. This includes the “hard skills,” such as cliff safety, knot tying, belaying, rope management, top rope set-ups, anchor transitions on multi-pitch climbs, gear removal, and rappelling—as well as the “soft skills” of movement techniques, communication, responsibility for interpersonal communication, and relationships to, and care of, the natural environment. Over the course of four years, the curriculum progresses from bottom-of-cliff to top-of-cliff skills.

PILLAR #3: A FAMILY-LIKE ATMOSPHERE

During their Kismet experience, students live together, family-style, in a house located in the Mt. Washington Valley. Everyone participates in meal preparations and clean up, sits down for meals together, enjoys activities (games, swimming, campfires, and more), shares responsibilities, and meets every evening to openly and honestly discuss events and feelings from the day. In order to create a safe space for that to happen, a key component of the home experience is the “full value contract.” “After meeting, eating pizza together, moving into the house, playing games and icebreakers

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their feelings, and helping them feel like they did something amazing, even if they just showed up at the cliff. It’s important that they know every step they take is progress.”

PILLAR #2: AN EDUCATION IN TECHNICAL ROCK CLIMBING

The bulk of the week is spent with participants, counselors, mentors, and professional climbing guides at the cliffs, engaging in a carefully developed technical rock-climbing

outside, we make a contract together so that every voice is heard from the very first night,” says Sharlah-Mae. “Everyone is there to help you feel comfortable.” Students might reflect on specific individual needs and preferences, communication styles, language choices, intentions, and more. Along with climbing, the home experience is “the crux” of the program, which allows for Mike’s original intent to bloom—freedom to become, to develop, and to find who they are and who they want to become by being seen, heard, valued, em-

braced, and loved. Every student signs the contract and outlines their hand on the paper to indicate their commitment. The contract can, and often is, revised as the week ensues, experiences are had, and the journey with self and others is explored. Along the way, the group learns together, and—with their support—individuals evolve.

Why Technical Rock Climbing

Beyond the more obvious reasons like the joy and beauty of nature and the fact that the Valley is replete with cliffs, rock climbing offers elegant, poignant, and seemingly endless analogies for life and for the human experience. Many (including this writer) would claim that climbing is unparalleled in this vein with other outdoor or physical pursuits. As Krissy Fraser, Kismet executive director, describes it, “The cliff *normalizes*, or *neutralizes*, unlike other sports that require more physical prowess.” She adds, “Three feet off the ground or to the top of the cliff, [the students] support each other and they’re excited for each other. They’ve gained something for themselves, and they’ve shown up for each other in a real way.” Sharlah-Mae adds, “Rock climbing is more niche. I don’t know a lot of kids that have done it, so it gives everyone an even slate.”

Caleb Scott describes climbing and its profound impact this way: “It’s a moment of quiet. It’s a busy world, and there are not a lot of moments of quiet available. It’s hard to get young people to know that they need that pause. A big part of my current journey as a Kismet counselor is trying to figure out how to engage them in that pause.” To answer “Why climbing?” he continues his analogies. “Climbing is about shifting weight—knowing when to slow down and think. It’s about learning good communication and learning how to trust each other. It’s not one aspect of your mind or body, it’s a holistic experience.” This connects with Mike’s experience that “climbing allows you to become familiar with one’s body in the moment.”

Another Kismet alumna, Samanta Mercier, reflects, “The lessons learned [climbing] instilled within me a sense of determination, perseverance, and self-belief that paved the way for my success.” The bond that rock climbing creates with another person is unique.


Sharlah-Mae adds, “Rock climbing is a personal journey with support. But it’s mostly you getting yourself up the wall. There’s nothing skill dependent. You’re just moving your body! Just like walking, but vertical. Climbing forces you to be more in tune with yourself. It’s scary, you’re trying, you’re overcoming, and everyone else you’re with is going through the same struggles.”

When climbing, all else seems to fade away. It’s just you, the rock in front of you, and your belayer. It’s the ultimate experience of being truly present—with yourself, with another human being, and with nature. What a beautiful analogy for the problems and roadblocks we experience day to day. The solutions are there. We just have to allow ourselves to see them. The texture, temperature, the integrity of the rock—it all makes a person feel so alive and connected.

Kids and Nature

As anyone who spends time in nature knows, it can be healing, rejuvenating, and nourishing, not to mention fun. Sharlah-Mae reflects about how important she thinks it is for young people to get outdoors more, “Being in nature helps take the pressure of society off of people.

Kismet students taking in the view at the Echo Roof area of White Horse Ledge in North Conway, NH. Nate Katsiaficas photo.



“My teachers had told me there were great things out there in the world and Kismet demonstrated that this was true and that I could find those great things.”



As a 7th grader, there was a lot of peer pressure to fit in. In nature, a tree is not going to judge you. It gives you space. There isn't the noise of society. It's like a bubble of sights and smells. It reminds you that you're here for the here and now." She goes on to share, "I bring my nieces outside—we hike up Jockey Cap or go to the park. I'll do anything to get them outside! Every single time, they want to do it again. They are get-

person, more secure, more comfortable in my own skin. I can make better connections with people. During the program week, there were no worries about money or everyday problems. Kismet nurtured a part of my soul I didn't even know existed. I am a first-generation college student. My essay about Kismet helped me get into college because it was clear how much it impacted my life. The compassion I experienced at

"I didn't realize I had a need, but the program helped me discover a whole new part of myself. Things I didn't know I could do or be or share. It met an emotional part of me I didn't know I had. I had many friends and family and felt loved at home, but this was a different kind of love. It was a 'soul bond,' allowing each of us to be our 'realist you.'" – Sharlah-Mae Day

ting to be kids and be free." She feels it's important for each of us to be ambassadors of the outdoors, to make personal connections with people, and get them outside by showing photos, conveying our personal experiences, and inviting them to join us on an adventure. "Some of my college friends had never seen the lake one-quarter mile from campus. Now I've brought them there!" Sharlah-Mae used to be scared to stray from the path or get too close to the edge. Now when she sees a rock or big mountain she thinks, "I could climb that!" She also runs rock-wall nights as a certified belayer through student engagement at her college.

Unearthing Potential

Samantha Mercier, another Kismet alumna, is on the threshold of graduating from law school and embarking on a career as a prosecutor in Belknap County. She shares that she is "keenly aware of Kismet's role in shaping the person I have become. The values of resilience, empathy, and integrity instilled during my time with Kismet have not only guided me through the rigors of academia, but have also prepared me to serve my community with compassion and purpose. My journey is a testament to the Foundation's unwavering commitment to nurturing the potential within every child, regardless of their background or circumstances."

Sharlah-Mae says, "By going through Kismet, I am a better

Kismet helped me choose to be a nursing student so I can give that compassion to others."

Local Support

Kismet is 100 percent supported by individual donations, grants, foundations, and corporate sponsors, including EMS, REI, and GBA, among others. Throughout the summer programming, Kismet is supported by a diverse and committed group of area businesses, including Cathedral Mountain Guides, Flatbread Company, and Matty B's Mountainside Café, to name a few.

Sharlah-Mae sums up the Kismet experience: "Kismet opened doors for me. In school, in my confidence, in not being afraid to take a chance. Missing a class to go to the presentation in 7th grade stressed me out back then. But I did go, and what a difference choosing one thing can make!" And that, my friends, is Kismet.

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P.O. Box 1744
North Conway, NH 03860
(603) 730-2715
www.kismetrockfoundation.org

