

Dark Skies Program for Youth Helps Promote the “Emotion of Awe”

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Under the stars at Snow Canyon State Park, Utah's newest Dark Sky certified location.

Youth mental health challenges have increased dramatically over the years, and it's no wonder, with constant digital exposure, social isolation, loneliness, and worries about the future.

“The things weighing on our youth are much heavier than in the past,” said Troy Allan, Utah State University Extension rural mental health and veteran initiatives specialist. “Our young people are facing a lot of chaos and uncertainty.”

Allan understands chaos. He served in Afghanistan as a U.S. Army chaplain, where he saw destruction, commotion, and trauma, and he eventually became mentally fatigued in his role helping those affected by war.

“One night, I was completely drained and went outside and just looked at the stars for a long time,” he said. “The longer I was out there, the more it made me feel part of something bigger. It really changed the way I looked at the world and the challenges I was facing. That sense of awe was life-changing for me that night.”

Allan retired from the Army and took a job with USU Extension working with mental health initiatives. Because of his own experiences, he took on the task of researching and developing a curriculum for youth to help promote the mental health benefits of dark night skies.

He and colleagues Sadie Wilde and Anna Gilliam, both USU Extension assistant professors, created “Skyward: Recalibrating Life Under the Stars,” a nature-based program that supports teen mental wellness through guided activities and shared outdoor experiences with other teens. The program invites youth to rediscover wonder, belonging, and a deeper sense of calm under the

night sky. It encourages them to slow down, look up, and rediscover their inner and outer worlds.

Allan said Skyward was born out of a simple observation: when teens spend time away from light pollution and under a truly dark sky, something shifts. The distractions of digital life, the noise of constant comparison, and the isolation of modern adolescence begin to soften.

“In these nighttime settings, awe, stillness, curiosity, and meaning emerge,” said Allan. “This program embraces a holistic view of learning, where experience, reflection, and emotional insight are just as valuable as knowledge.”

The Skyward program is geared toward Utah youth ages 12 to 18 and runs from June through November. Camps will be held in dark-sky certified areas, state and national parks, and forested areas. [Registration is now open](#) for one-and two-night options in locations around the state.

Allan said that in addition to dark-sky viewing, youth will be involved with astronomy education, reflective writing and journaling, mental wellness practices, and group discussions. Utah's Leave No Trace principles will also be taught. The program invites teens to move from internal pressure toward external wonder and awe, and from fragmented attention toward deep noticing.

“How can we develop awe in gardens, schools, and life?” he asked. “We need to develop communities that inspire people. We are part of something larger. Just paying attention to that can change lives.”

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