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TELEVISION REVIEW

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An uncomfortably close look at nine troubled teens

By Matthew Gilbert, Globe Staff | July 13, 2005

There's something inspirational about "Brat Camp," despite its wrongheaded title. Like a few recent reality shows, it takes an openly do-gooder approach as it sets wayward teens on the path to healing at a harsh wilderness camp. Anyone who has ever known a kid in trouble -- and who hasn't? -- will probably find the series emotionally charged. Nine young broken spirits, having fallen into drug abuse and violence, are given the kind of emergency rescue effort that goes beyond their parents' failed attempts. The show offers hope.

But before I continue to look on the sunny side, let me say that there is something creepy and unfair about "Brat Camp," which premieres with a two-hour episode tonight at 8 on Channel 5. It reminds me of a despicable A&E series called "Intervention," in which addicts of all kinds are fooled into an intervention and scooted off to rehab, all on camera. Not only have the addicts been filmed for our entertainment at their lowest of lows, but they're clearly in no condition to have given away their permission to be filmed in the first place.

"Brat Camp" similarly captures its confused kids undergoing extremely personal psychological breakdowns on TV. And really, what 14-year-olds -- on the edge or not -- are able to judge whether they want to cry, yell, and reveal their darkest secrets in prime time? Do they realize this isn't "The Real World"? Are they truly equipped to decide that they want to spend their lives as TV's Lexie, "Hostile Outcast," or TV's Jada, "Compulsive Liar"? I think not.

The concept of the show is that frustrated parents have sent their kids to SageWalk, a wilderness camp in Oregon. There, among the rigors of tents and backpacks, they undergo mental discipline, physical privations, and counseling from the adult instructors. In theory, they will be scared straight by Mother Nature, and they will let go of their baggage. And indeed, brat camp seems like a wonderful thing, as it pulls the kids away from their cellphones, TV, drugs, and harmful friends for a fresh chance. More power to the folks at SageWalk, who adopt "earth names" such as Glacier Mountain Wolf and Mother Raven. In their sweet, touchy-feely way, they are admirable.

But the show about SageWalk makes me uncomfortable, not least of all because the title itself reduces some pretty deep-seated problems to mere brattiness. It may be hard to turn away while seeing footage of these kids smoking pot and drinking, or of their parents sobbing with despair. But Jada, the 15-year-old from Boston who has trouble being honest, deserves privacy when she falls apart hours into the camp experience. Words like "crying" understate what she goes through on-screen, rocking madly and ranting. Lexie, 17, also deserves confidentiality when she freaks out early in the show, and later tells the group about her early tragedy.

Certainly what these kids go through at SageWalk is instructive for viewers, and particularly for parents. But then, they're not there for us.

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