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## Pair of friends say Yampah is the perfect fit for high school

Parents weren't sure at first, but now embrace what school offers

**BY JOHN GARDNER**  
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GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Colo. — Hannah Saliman didn't fit in at Glenwood Springs High School.

She didn't have many friends, even battled depression and suicide. Graduation seemed to be an unlikely goal.

"It was a very difficult time for her," said Hannah's mother, Ginny McKinney. "She didn't fit the cookie-cutter mold that is high school."

But it was much more than not fitting the mold. A chill grips both Hannah and her mother when they think about what might have happened if Hannah didn't find an alternative to attending GSHS.

"I would be very scared to say," McKinney said flatly. "She was so angry and hated herself. It was so sad to watch. I felt hopeless."

Hannah's parents did all they could to help their daughter, but McKinney said that the high school just wasn't the right fit.

Toward the end of Hanna's sophomore year her longtime friend, Kara Gibson, a student at Yampah Mountain High School, offered a suggestion - what about transferring to Yampah Mountain?

Even with all the problems her daughter was having, Hannah's mother wasn't convinced that was the answer.

"We knew that we had to do something," McKinney said. "I wasn't thrilled with the idea of Yampah because of the stigma."

But that was about to change.

Kara Gibson, left, and Hannah Saliman are two of 35 seniors at Yampah Mountain High School this school year.

**Post Independent/Kelley Cox**



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### The stigma

To many in the area, Yampah Mountain High School has a stigma of being the school for rejects that can't hack-it in the traditional school setting.

Most can probably recall at one time passing by the school on Midland Avenue, a motley crew of kids near the tree, many dressed like a punk-rock band, maybe smoking cigarettes.



Yampah Mountain High School students gather for a group photo Monday, the first day of the new school year.

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The delicate-green school house resembles a single-family residence more than a school. Maybe that's the point - to create an atmosphere, a place where outcast students feel at home.

"The students in some of the programs like the teen-parent program come here for a very particular reason," said Yampah Mountain High School principal Leigh McGown. "But other kids, like the ones in the alternative high school program, come for several different reasons."

Like Hannah and Kara.

### The alternative

Kara Gibson's father, Michael, was another parent who didn't think YMHS was the right place for his daughter. After all, she was only in the eighth grade when she made the decision to attend the alternative high school. Kara said that her father was "a little reserved" about the idea and it took her parents a while to accept it.

"I was like 'no way,'" Michael said.

"It's got a reputation," he told a then pre-high school Kara.

His young daughter looked at him and asked what any inquisitive child would ask: "What reputation?"

"I don't know, but it has one," he replied.

After speaking with several people about the school he finally heard from one person in particular about the teen parent program.

"That was it?" he questioned. "That's the stigma."

From there he went to the source and familiarized himself with the school where Kara has attended the past three years.

"I have never seen anything like it," he said. "The last three years have been excellent. They empower the kids and give them a choice to learn what interests them."

Kara's always been a good student, Michael says, but classes at Glenwood Springs Middle School just weren't challenging her.

"I got good grades," Kara said. "But I wasn't developing as a person."

Kara and Hannah agreed that they didn't feel like they were learning anything in the classrooms at traditional schools because they were just repeating what the teachers would tell them in class.

"That's not learning," Kara said. "That's adapting to a system."

But without the stigma.

"The entire town judges Yampah," Kara said. "They see one person who fails and think that's representative of the school but it's not."

### About the school

- YMHS uses the (William) Glasser Guiding Philosophy emphasizing relationship building between students and teachers (advisors). Acceptance of each individual student is a key component to the learning environment.

- The alternative program focuses on experiential or performance learning. Students aren't provided with only one educational method where they are expected to sit in a classroom and told what topics to learn. Rather, at YMHS students are participants in all aspects of designing their education and are encouraged to engage with their surrounding community to fully experience learning.

- The alternative program is a public school enrolling students each quarter of the school year. YMHS is currently still registering students this fall quarter. Any students residing in Aspen, Roaring Fork, Garfield School District Re-2 or Parachute are eligible to apply. Interested families should contact Rachel at 945-9463, ext. 100.

### **A family environment**

It's pretty easy to fail at Yampah, according to the Kara and Hannah. It's not a place to slack off, no matter what you may have heard.

"You can come here and not do anything, but you won't stay here too long," Kara said. "If you fail here it's because you're not working."

The first days at the new school, Hannah was surprised at how the students were expected to meet certain state educational requirements but also had a say in what they wanted to study. It's not a traditional system at all.

"It was a lot more difficult than I expected," Hannah said. "But the advisors and students really help you out here. They will give you a second chance."

That first year at Yampah was more than a revelation for Hannah, it was an awakening. Her demeanor changed, her confidence level rose, she again had passion for learning like her friend Kara.

"The school is about self motivation, it's up to you to learn the subjects," Hannah said.

Self motivation and discipline, encouraging passion to learn about real life subjects entwined with the required subjects as well - that's what Yampah offers.

"(Yampah) integrated things I was passionate about into the learning," Kara said. "Plus the relationships with teachers is better. They're much more friendly here and you are able to talk to any of them about stuff that you wouldn't normally talk to teachers about."

After three years of his daughter attending class at Yampah, Michael knows about the family feel.

"It really is an extended family environment," he said. "There is mutual respect among the kids. They want to be individuals and that's how they're recognized. That's something I treasure about the school."

### **Coming home**

To hear the girls talk excitedly about returning for their senior year at Yampah is a bit unexpected, seeming more like students preparing for summer break.

But they've had all three months to enjoy the summer, and now they're returning to school. They're coming home in a sense.

"It was hard to be in school where everyone has insecurities," Hannah said. "Coming here (to Yampah) I was depressed, I had a lot of things going on and issues to deal with, but I have a support system here."

To realize how far she's come, Hannah just has to look back at where she was.

"Coming (to Yampah) was the best thing that's happened to me, it saved my life."

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