

HIGH-ALTITUDE BONDING/ IT'S LIKE
BOY SCOUT CAMP — ONLY FOR GIRLS

MALLET MAN/ THIS AIN'T YOUR GRANDMA'S LAWN BALL
LAST WORD/ STRONG MAYOR MUSINGS

ADVOCATE

LAKE HIGHLANDS

URBAN LIVING DALLAS MARCH 2005

PEOPLE+PLACES

ADVENTURE BONDING

Neighborhood man's program brings fathers, daughters together at key point

balancing on a wire 25 feet above the ground, Kipp Murray felt fear. Then right before his eyes, 15-year-old daughter

Megan took the lead, encouraging her father to finish the high ropes course with her.

"Just in that two or three seconds,

our roles flipped. She became the leader; she became the adult; she became the comforter. And I was the one who needed all that," Murray says.

For Murray, that moment marked the culmination of a dream he initiated four years earlier when he started High Adventure Treks for Dads & Daughters (HATS).

"We started the whole process thinking we'd teach the girls outdoor skills," he says. "Those were just the vehicles that taught us to communicate. It's a bond that lasts a lifetime."

Megan, now a 20-year-old sophomore at Texas Tech, calls HATS a life-changing experience. Sharing outdoor adventures forged a lifelong connection between father and daughter, she says.

"I learned how to communicate with him. So all through high school, when so much is going on in a girl's life, I knew how to talk to him," she says. "It's a relationship that lasts longer than HATS."

Murray's inspiration for HATS evolved while on an 11-day backpacking trip with his son, Reed. Sitting atop the 12,800-foot peak of New Mexico's Mount Phillips, Murray says he felt overjoyed by the experience he had shared with his son. Moments later, the realization struck that he could never have the same with his daughter.

"I knew Megan and I would never



ROBERT BUNCH

Kipp Murray and his daughter, Megan, formed a strong bond in part because of Murray's program HATS.

have a chance to do that because she was not a Boy Scout," he says.

David Kent, whose oldest son and daughter are the same ages as Murray's children, says he remembers Murray outlining his vision atop the mountain during their sons' Boy Scouting trip. Five weeks later, Kent received a letter announcing the first HATS meeting.

"I was just blown away," he says. "It's just living proof that one person committed to a project, to an idea, can make things happen."

Murray recruited father-daughter teams from school, church and neighborhood organizations to form his first HATS group. He developed a four-year program to teach the girls outdoor and survival skills while strengthening their relationships with their fathers.

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HATS started with 10 father-daughter teams when the girls were sixth-graders. By the time they reached ninth grade, 140 teams were involved.

Each year the program focuses on a skill — canoeing, rock climbing, mountain biking and backpacking. The program now starts with an instructional campout in the spring of fifth grade followed by a second campout in the fall. The pattern continues each year, culminating with a nine-day "High Adventure Trek" in the ninth grade.

Kent, who went through the program with daughter Meredith, says HATS differentiates itself from other youth programs because it requires parent and child to work as a team. Girls cannot attend without their fathers.

"Unlike some of the other programs out there, you don't turn the kids over to someone else," he says. "That forces some togetherness, but that was what I wanted. ... I saw that as a very positive attribute."

Megan says the interaction gave her strength at a time in life when young girls can be plagued by self-doubt and peer pressure.

"I was really excited that my dad wanted to do stuff with me," she says. "I became more responsible; I had higher self-esteem."

Murray says he felt he had achieved his goals for HATS when he and Megan participated in a nine-day excursion to Colorado that included rock climbing, horse packing, rafting and the infamous high ropes course.

"But I had a lot of the dads come up to me and say: This cannot die here," he says.

In December 2001, Murray incor-

porated HATS and gained non-profit status. Kent sits on the board. More than 240 father-daughter teams now participate with chapters in Lake Highlands, Oak Cliff, Rockwall and Plano.

Megan and Meredith stay involved, too, by going on trips with the younger girls. After their ninth-grade trip, the girls earn "key mentor" status. Along with their fathers, the key mentors serve as role models, leaders and instructors for newer participants.

"As we're growing, we're teaching the volunteers how to do these things so they can keep the program going," Murray said.

Eventually, Murray said he hopes to see HATS expand across Texas and the nation. He expects membership to top 1,000 teams within 18 months.

Kent says HATS is receiving recognition and support for its efforts. The Dallas Women's Foundation gave the organization a grant, and Frito Lay and REI offered corporate sponsorships. The Lake Highlands Exchange Club named Murray one of its Unsung Heroes. Volunteers worked more than 1,000 hours last year.

One father who participated in his first HATS trip last spring was so impressed with the program that he offered to organize the next outing.

"That's the mark of a successful program," Kent says, "and we're getting more and more of that."

Recruitment for new fifth-grade participants is beginning now. For information, visit www.highadventuretreks.org, e-mail info@highadventuretreks.org, or call 214-341-7630.

ELIZABETH LANGTON