

American Backyard Project opens eyes



Group photo: Clockwise from top left: Ted Scheinman of Hamilton, N.Y.; Brian Reed of Shelton; Oril Fluharty, 93, of Loma Mar, Calif.; Josh Bednarsky of Shelton; Jake Crawford of Pescadero, Calif.; and Chris Alesevich of Shelton pose for a photo at Fluharty's house, which is nestled among the redwoods in Loma Mar. He cooked the group a lumberjack breakfast, showed them how to use a chain saw, and told them stories from his long life. Reed and Alesevich, both 20, were part of a group that traveled across the United States in a van to talk with strangers about their goals and aspirations.

Friends chronicle strangers' goals, aspirations on cross-country trip

By **FELICIA HUNTER**
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SHELTON — When they were boys, Brian Reed and Chris Alesevich vividly imagined a fantastic inventory of places they would go and things they would see when they got older.

Unlike most, the childhood pals carried out their plans.

This summer, Reed and Alesevich, both 20, were part of a group that hopped in a van and traveled across the United States to talk with strangers about their goals and aspirations. They chronicled what they learned through audio and video recordings, still photographs, journals and diaries, aiming to create a documentary about the trip.

"The early birth of it came for us in sixth grade," Reed, a Yale junior, said about the project's origins eight years ago. "We were talking about how nice it would be to travel cross-country in college."

"It was so life-changing," Reed said.

"The trip surpassed any expectations I could possibly have," Alesevich said.

However, Reed and Alesevich wonder about some of their newfound friends on the Gulf Coast who may have been displaced by the devastating hurricane.

"We met a lot of people there who we tried to contact [afterward], but we haven't been able to," Reed said.

They read scores of books, what the group called their "traveling library," to help give the mission a philosophical and intellectual foundation, they said. The collection included works by John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, Eugene O'Neill, Zora Neale Hurston, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, George Orwell, Martin Luther King Jr. and Alexis de Toqueville. They even carried a copy of the U.S. Constitution.

Shelton resident Josh Bednarsky, a 19-year-old sophomore

Last year, he and Alesevich, a junior at the University of Southern California, revisited the idea and determined the time had come to realize their plan. They sketched an outline for what they called the American Backyard Project and secured funding through fellowships from their respective colleges. After buying a used van and stuffing it with books, a borrowed video camera and other materials, Reed, Alesevich and two other travelers took off from Shelton on June 5.

The 63-day, coast-to-coast trek to discover America led them through 33 states and the District of Columbia.

"The idea was to talk to people about the pursuit of happiness without actually [pointedly] interviewing them," Reed said. "We had no agenda. It was like collecting stories. It was very much an oral history project."

The experience allowed them to encounter people and situations they would not typically come across, he said. A 93-year-old California lumberjack shared his thoughts about life and demonstrated how to use a chain saw. A Wyoming hunter discussed unusual wildlife delicacies and recounted his and his American Indian wife's personal adventures. A jocular group of Boise, Idaho, residents introduced them to river tubing. A social scientist on sabbatical in pre-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans talked about his love of the city.

Sometimes invited to stay with strangers, they are amazed at the number of open, trusting people they met.

at Marymount Manhattan College, said he still has a "blissful feeling" about the journey.

"The people we met, the food we ate, the things we read, it's something everybody should do," he said. "Diversity is good for everyone to experience. People all over the country are very different, yet very similar."

Bednarsky joined the group in California in mid-July, flying to San Francisco after one of the travelers decided to leave.

The original foursome included Ted Scheinman of Hamilton, N.Y., Reed's roommate at Yale.

A Web site maintained by the travelers, regularly updated through stops at public libraries along the way, gives an overview of the experience. However, 40 hours of video footage needs to be logged and transcribed, and "tons" of still photographs must be sorted.

"We have so much material that it is actually crippling," Reed said.

But it is, all agree, worth the effort.

Their work shows that sharing and family are what people throughout the country hold most dear, said Bednarsky, adding that accumulating material wealth is not a primary goal for the people they met.

"Where the most sharing was, the most happiness was, it really had nothing to do with money," Bednarsky said. "That was definitely a common theme: being able to share one's talents and personal strengths with others."

For more information about the trip, visit www.americanbackyard.org.