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Adventure course serves children in need

Challenges built for RFK Corps

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Brian Ketchen installs steel cables high in a tree yesterday as he builds a challenge course at the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps' Lancaster campus. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

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LANCASTER— There's a lot of activity going on in the treetops behind the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps, and it's not of the feather-and-fur type. These are shirtless men perched more than 30 feet up on thick tree trunks, assembling trapezes, climbing ropes, catwalks, cable tightropes, and other elements of a "vertical playpen."

Construction started last week on a new challenge course at the school, a state-run residential program for troubled youths off Old Common Road. When the first part is completed later this month, the course will be used for the nonprofit agency's adventure education curriculum, an outdoor program styled after Outward Bound, according to Richard A. Hylan, RFK's adventure education director.

The project consists of two high (as in trees) elements for children 11 and older — including a 38-foot climbing tower — and two low elements, such as 1-foot-high cable walks strung among trees, and lower climbing ropes — for younger children. There will also be an obstacle course and a jungle gym.

"It's experiential learning, meaning you learn by doing," Mr. Hylan said. "But it's challenge by choice. No one is forced to do anything. With these kids, it's important to decide on things without group manipulation. A point of the course is to build good relationships within the group.

"For several years, an important part of our program has been a heavy focus on problem solving and functioning as a group," Mr. Hylan said.

Children will use the course together, he said, in groups of about eight to 10.

The agency, which has 10 campuses around the state, serves children who have emotional and learning problems. Many, often taken from abusive environments, are placed by the state Department of Youth Services and other state agencies. The 25-acre Lancaster campus, on a former state prison and an older industrial girls' school site, has about 70 boys and girls ages 7 to 18.

Mr. Hylan said the adventure education program started at the Lancaster campus in 1994 with a national minibike program. Other outdoor activities include hiking, kayaking, and snowshoeing.

Most of the new challenge course is in a wooded area behind a new dormitory that had been used for a minibike trail and part of a former challenge course. The old course, which has been closed for years, and much of the minibike trail were removed when the new building was constructed two years ago.

Yesterday, workers from Pittsfield-based Absolutely Experiential, one of just a few such challenge course contractors in the state, pounded large staples, screws and bolts into tall trees. Mr. Hylan said children would be protected while on the ropes and cables by harnesses and a system of rope pulleys.

"They can fall, but they don't hit the ground," he said, noting that the cables can hold the weight of a small car.

The 38-foot climbing tower will be in the back of the campus, off Route 110.

Students will likely begin using the course next month, Mr. Hylan said, after the staff is trained.

A spokeswoman for the agency said the course would eventually be open to other youth organizations and the public, for a fee.