

FINDING A PATH FOR

Ernie Corrigan and Gary McCabe



A few years after the loss of their son Dan to suicide in 2007, just months before his expected graduation from Wellesley High School, the McCabe family, with the help of their friends, decided to be public about their son's death and his lasting impact on them and others. They started **A Path in the Woods Foundation** to focus on the needs of young adults who are struggling with mental health issues that are more complex and lasting than the academic or social struggles that most teens find their way through.

Creating the Foundation began as a response to their personal

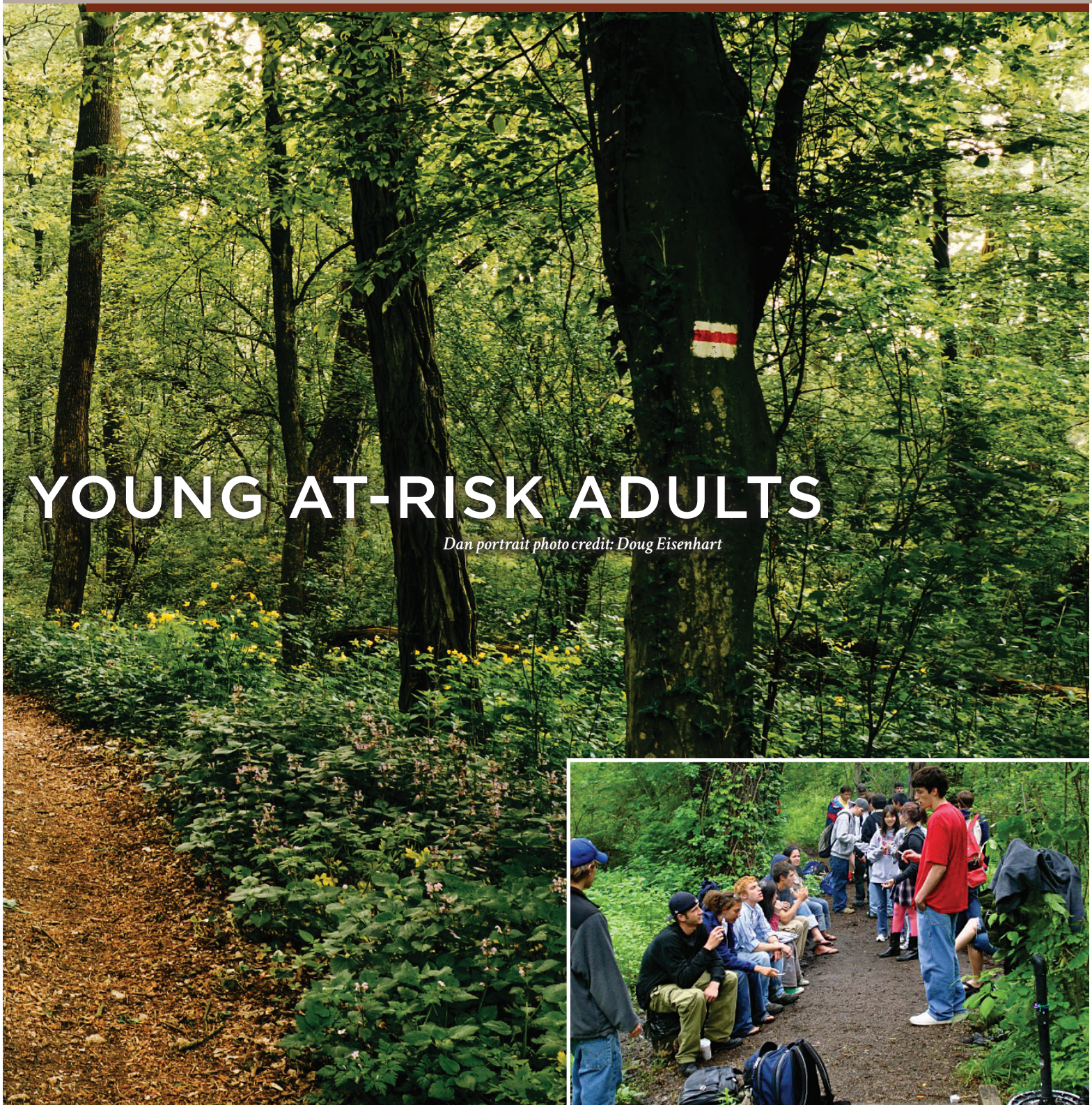
and painful experience of profound grief and loss.

"The mission as a foundation in large part was the mission of the family that was left behind," Gary McCabe recalls. "We were trying to understand why our family was no longer whole and why other Wellesley families were feeling the same pain, and why were we so helpless to do anything about it."

As the Foundation began to raise funds through an annual golf tournament and an outpouring of donations, McCabe says that he and his family began to expand their mission to try and answer more proactive questions. *Why does this hap-*

YOUNG AT-RISK ADULTS

Dan portrait photo credit: Doug Eisenhart



pen? And What can we do to change the future for those teenagers that can't navigate their way through feeling unwell and unwanted?

Now, twelve years after starting the nonprofit foundation, the Path Foundation has moved even deeper into its core mission to open new doors of opportunity and exploration for the young people in our community. Gary, who serves as president of the Foundation, recently announced that the Path has formed an alliance with NITEO (Latin for thrive), an intensive one-semester wellness and academic skills program at The Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston Universi-

ty's Sargent College.

“Our focus has always been local and focused on the high school,” says McCabe. “That remains our focus, but we are also trying to look beyond that because our kids face the same challenges as the students that the BU Center counsels and coaches. The Center is dealing with kids facing the same pressures - academic, social, and all of that.”

Courtney Joly- Lowdermilk, who manages the NITEO program at The Center where the program is housed, said that the challenge of the NITEO program is to connect with students



who are silently suffering from depression or anxiety and even psychotic behaviors.

“There are any number of underlying reasons, ranging from academic stress to gender identity or sexual identity,” she says. “The challenge for them and for us is how to engage them and keep them engaged. Sometimes it’s as easy as getting these kids to sit around the table with other students who are experiencing similar anxiety or depression, to talk about it in a safe environment. The truth is that we have to be very actively engaged and on our toes. Those good days and conversations may not last long.”

As any parent who has experienced their own child’s emotional suffering knows, it isn’t easy engaging your child. As the McCabe family knows, son Dan’s day-to-day life experience included close friends, the Boy Scouts and camping trips, church retreats, and frequent gatherings of family as well as a commitment to after school and summer jobs; but also dark periods of isolation, self-doubt, and drug use.

One of the core strategies of the Path Foundation is to create opportunities for community engagement and personal reward through after-school jobs for kids who are more inclined to retreat from their friends and social network. McCabe resurrected a work-study program from when he attended Wellesley High School in the 1970s with the help of the Wellesley Youth Commission. The WHS work-study program had lost favor to the increasing pressure and perceived core value of academic achievement and acceptance into the best colleges.

The Path Foundation has sponsored work-study internships with several town departments and the Wellesley Media Corp, the local not-for-profit community cable television and production company.

The affiliation with the NITEO program connects the Path Foundation with a professional college-based program that is focused on the same 18 to 24 year old demographic that is at a higher risk of failing to thrive.

There is no formula says Joly-Lowdermilk. It is young adult to young adult, day to day, crisis to crisis. NITEO is engaging more directly with families of these young adults in the course of their approach, understanding that the family role is potentially critical. Her ‘boiled-down’ tenets:

- Self-care is not selfish. The process requires exploring routine resources, recovery and respite for personal well-being.
- We all need the right tools in our toolkit - kids, parents counselors - to have these difficult conversations if you’re going to make a difference and pull these kids out of their trajectories. The tools we have used in the past may not work anymore.
- Shift away from shame and blame. It hasn’t worked in the past and it is unlikely to work in the future.
- Listen, don’t talk, when you can be in a conversation with someone who is struggling.

“Give them the space to feel and say what they are thinking,” she says. “They





are not looking to us to fix them as much as they are looking to us to listen to them. We can help fix them along the way, but what they want at first is trust and a safe place to say things they've never said to another adult before."

"What we are saying to kids is that you each have your own path, and you don't need to worry about someone else's path," says McCabe. "That fits in with what NITEO was saying to their students who are roughly the same age but are now facing new pressures from college and being away from home for the first time. We can learn a lot from their work and apply it to kids who haven't hit 18 yet and are willing to engage with us, a school teacher or counselor, or a family friend.

The work of the PATH Foundation, he said, is to foster engagement and intervention into the life of a young adult who can easily slip through the cracks even when it seems that everyone is watching.

A Path in the Woods Foundation, Inc. is a nonprofit charitable organization created in 2009 in memory and in honor of the spirit and ideas of Daniel McCabe of Wellesley, Massachusetts. The organization is dedicated to opening new doors of opportunity and exploring for the young people in our community and beyond who are searching for their own path in life and need assistance - financial or otherwise - in beginning their journey.

You can support the foundation with a financial gift or an offer of an internship or job for students. You can reach us at the.path.foundation@comcast.net.

