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Kids, law gear up for Rendezvous

By SARA REED

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Matt can't wait for summer when he gets to spend a week camping, hiking, rafting and more with area law enforcement.

Matt, 13, whose last name is not being used because he is in foster care, is looking forward to attending his second Laramie River Valley Rendezvous, which brings at-risk youth together with Fort Collins police officers, Larimer County Sheriff's deputies, members of the Colorado National Guard and Poudre Fire Authority firefighters for the weeklong event, now in its 22nd year.

"I thought it was great," Matt said. "It was a chance to make a lot of friends and talk about life in general."

Matt said he loves the camping and the horseback riding but the real value comes from the friends he's made and knowing that he's not alone in his family situation.

Matt said it made him feel better to talk to other kids who also live in foster care or come from single-parent homes.

"They felt more like friends than other friends you make," Matt said. "They felt like brothers and sisters."

The trip also changed Matt's perception of law enforcement.

"Those guys (law enforcement) always seem like the guys who are going to be taking you down," he said. "You think they're all tough and angry all the time but they're just regular people. Once you see that, you learn to respect them."

The program is back for its second year after it was interrupted for a year when Fort Collins police cut funding for the program amid budget constraints.

For the past two years, Fort Collins police officer Bob Younger has put numerous hours of his own time into planning the event and raising money to fund it.

"I would hate to see something like this go," he said.

The trip can be a life changing experience for the kids, Younger said.

"I want every kid to experience that," Younger said. "They're close to nature and have positive role models."

Younger estimated it will cost around \$20,000 to put on this year's trip. He recently applied for a \$10,000 grant from the Bohemian Foundation and is hoping to raise another \$10,000 to \$20,000 through private and corporate donors.

Citizens also are welcome to volunteer their time, even if it comes in the form of stuffing envelopes and handling applications, Younger said.

The program, which is free to participants, is open to teens 13 to 16 who come from single-parent homes or other at-risk populations, Younger said.

The teens can't have had extensive negative contact with law enforcement and must have a reference, Younger said.

Campers from previous years are invited to apply as well, he said.
