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Youth offender sets course to better life

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JERRY McBRIDE / Herald

Audie Morris, left, and Dereck Glover, staff members with Rite of Passage at the Robert E. DeNier Youth Services Center in Durango, stand behind Mike Thompson, 18, on Monday at the center. Mike will begin a bike ride from Washington state to Mexico on Aug. 11 with nine other riders.

Mike Thompson, an inmate at the Robert E. DeNier Youth Services Center, is taking a big first step - 3,200 miles - toward setting his life on the right track.

Thompson, 18, of Durango, will pedal a road bike from Sumas, Wash., to the Arizona-Mexico border. The ride, which will begin Aug. 11, will take two months.

Thompson is one of 10 juvenile offenders doing the ride, which zigzags from state to state. He is the only youth offender from Durango participating.

"Negative actions" fueled by drugs landed Thompson in the juvenile detention center, he said. But since arriving at DeNier five months ago, Thompson has accepted responsibility for his actions and shown a positive attitude, earning him the right to participate in the border-to-border ride, said Audie Morris, a DeNier supervisor.

"This is really about helping him with the rest of his life," Morris said. "We're very proud of him and very confident sending him on this trip."

Thompson said DeNier is the last opportunity for him to turn his life around and stay out of prison. He plans to make the most of it. "It offers a lot of chances and hope for kids who have problems," Thompson said about DeNier. "I came in here with a positive attitude. ... It's obviously time for me to change my life and start rising to the top."

DeNier, located in Bodo Industrial Park, can house as many as 28 offenders. Most of them are from Southwest Colorado, but some come from other parts of the state.

DeNier is owned by the state and is part of the state's juvenile corrections program. The state contracts with Rite of Passage, a private company based in Nevada, to oversee the center. Rite of Passage, which operates six centers, is sponsoring the bike ride.

While at DeNier, Thompson has competed in mountain bike races in Durango, and last week he rode 50 miles to Farmington in 3½ hours. He said he's excited about seeing the country and seeing the scenery change from the saddle of his bike.

He will have more time to serve at DeNier after the bike ride, but with a good-behavior rating, he is hoping to be released sooner than expected. He plans to get his high school diploma while at DeNier.

Thompson doesn't know what career path he wants to pursue, saying he will decide after enrolling in college.

"I've tried drugs, and it didn't work out for me," Thompson said. "I've decided to do something different."

Reach Staff Writer Shane Benjamin here .