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HIDDEN LAKE ACADEMY

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Visit on March 25, 2001
By Lon Woodbury, C.E.P.

Hidden Lake Academy has what among some educational consultants call “drive-by appeal.” That is, the physical plant shows itself as an upscale quality boarding school, nestled in a beautiful natural setting with its own private lake. The care and landscaping of the campus is evident from the school’s entrance.

The campus is organized around the 15-acre lake. On one side of the lake are the dorms, classrooms, gymnasium, administrative offices and the new girl’s dorm, which is currently under construction. These buildings line the ridge on one side of the lake, leaving the far side of the lake in its natural state. A dirt road follows the far shoreline with hiking trails leading to the ropes course, which branches off into the adjacent forest. Near the dam at the end of the lake are docks, canoes, a gazebo for outdoor functions, a waterfall, tennis court and a recreation building. Boating and fishing are part of the outdoor recreation in which the students may participate. At the head of the lake are fields for soccer, baseball, and other outdoor sports.

My visit started with a school meeting in the gymnasium conducted by Headmaster, Greg Lindsey. Such meetings occur twice a week. The meeting included all students, with the exception of those on “Restriction.” Lindsey did the usual kind of announcements of schedule changes, events, and etc. that you would hear in a traditional boarding school student body meeting. However, the therapeutic nature of the school became evident in his discussion of the monthly school theme. Each month the student body focuses on a given theme that is used as an anchor concept, permeating that day’s activities.

The students who do not attend the school meeting, because they were on “restriction,” are those who essentially had demonstrated some dishonesty in their daily life at the school. Usually they were either continuing or resurrecting their manipulative and dishonest attitudes from before they enrolled at Hidden Lake Academy. Being on “restriction” involves the loss of free time. Students on restriction must eat their meals separate from the student body and must participate in campus work assignments during the afternoon’s activities.

Their privileges are limited, the structure is very tight, but ample help and time is available for academic homework as well as the individualized writing assignments given by the Counselors to help students gain insight into their behaviors and attitudes. During group therapy sessions further emphasis is placed on them to apply those insights to their lives.

Therapeutics are very important at the school. I was informed that every therapist has a Master’s degree in counseling or a related field, and 18 of the 38 Peer Group Counselors have taken one or more peer groups through the 18-month therapeutic curriculum. Dr. Meredith Burns explained that the retention rate, thus the experience level of the school’s staff, is high because of each therapist contracts to stay with their peer group from the beginning to the end of the peer group’s therapeutic work. This allows Counselors to experience the growth of the students throughout the student’s entire time at the School.

Peer groups meet for “Realizations,” or group therapy twice a week. These groups can either be focused on helping students find ways to avoid falling back into their self-defeating patterns, or they can help students discover ways to get out of their patterns of negative thinking. While the groups are forthright and direct, I got the impression they would not be considered as confrontational as was often the norm in a number of other schools in the eighties. In addition to the Realizations, Counselors lead other psycho educational peer group sessions in the mornings and evenings throughout the week. Theme Realizations are on Wednesdays, addressing various issues such as adoption, grief/loss, substance abuse or other areas. While only a small number of the students have significant substance abuse problems, the issue is addressed on several levels, depending on the significance of the issue to each student.

Academics are as equally important as therapeutics. The school is very proud of their accreditation not only by the Georgia Accrediting Commission, but also by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The school had originally applied for accreditation as a Special Needs school, but the regional accrediting commission suggested they apply at the traditional boarding school level since their academic program exceeded by far the requirements for Special Needs status. Small classes are the norm; each student has an individualized academic plan and all teachers are certified. An important mark of the success of their academics, the school officials informed me, is that virtually 100% of the students who have completed high school at Hidden Lake Academy have been accepted to college.

After sitting in one of the group sessions, I toured the classrooms. The classes and hallways were buzzing with the positive and constructive noise of students going about their academic activities. The teachers were enthusiastic about their working conditions and radiated the sense of job satisfaction that comes from teachers who know they are making a difference in the lives of students. Student art projects were evident throughout the campus. I learned that the school uses the healing properties of art both in the classroom and in activities throughout the school.

Students, except those on restriction, eat in the school cafeteria overlooking the lake. The room was very typical of high school cafeterias with the buzz of students eating lunch with friends. There was a brief time for the socializing afterwards, which is so important to the average teen. Care is taken that the meals are nutritious; the meal I had was more than adequate.

Expansion plans are evident with plans for an academic extension, a larger library, a new girl’s dorm, and a chapel. The foundation was being dug for the girls’ dorm and the academic extension plans are on prominent display in the administrative offices. This expansion, which has been ongoing since my last visit several years ago, combined with the generally safe feeling of the students and the campus itself, reflects a maturing school that is manifesting the original mission envisioned by the school’s founder, Dr. Leonard Buccellato. The solidity of the school is also reflected in the annual survey I do among independent educational consultants. Over the past three years, Hidden Lake Academy has been one of the few schools that have had the almost unanimous approval of the independent Educational Consultants who participate in the survey. Those survey results, along with my own impressions from visiting the school, strongly suggest that the internal workings of the school reflect as much quality as the outer appearance.