

VISITS...

FAMILY FOUNDATION SCHOOL

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Visit by Larry Stednitz, October 2, 2007

Family Foundation School is a college prep therapeutic boarding school founded 30 years ago. The school accepts students, grades six through twelve, who struggle with a variety of behavioral, emotional, learning differences and/or substance abuse issues. The middle school is separate from the high school to meet the unique needs of each population. Most students are underachievers with high potential for academic success. Common issues include difficulty relating to family, depression, promiscuity, eating disorders and other compulsive disorders. Approximately 70 percent of the students are involved with substance abuse/ dependency issues.

The School has three overarching and fundamental goals for all students:

- ◆ Maximize academic potential
- ◆ Develop spiritually and emotionally through a 12-Step program of recovery

- ◆ To grow and mature psychologically through the 12-Step program as well as group and individual therapies

All students are expected to participate in a rigorous academic program, and although the school can work with some learning differences, it is important that enrollees are average to above average intellectually. In many ways, the school looks and operates like a traditional boarding school, and boasts of 100 percent acceptance at post-secondary institutions. Students can take a variety of dual credit college courses while in school. The school has a capacity of 240 students and is divided into 8 family groups with an average length of stay being 18-24 months.

Family Foundation School has a rich variety of athletics and other activities as well. The school offers interscholastic sports including basketball, soccer and golf. Girls' soft ball and co-ed cheerleading are also offered. Other important activities include art, drama, photography, hiking, K-9 training, fly-fishing and Boy Scouts. Students may also participate in chorus and often compete nationally with other high schools.

The strong underpinnings of the program are the 12-Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and this model is



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used for a wide variety of problems. Spiritual development is an important focus of treatment and students are regularly offered organized prayer and multi-denominational chapel services.

In addition to the 12-Steps, the therapeutic milieu includes individual, group and family counseling. The school has psychiatric coverage and those needing medications are monitored by their psychiatrist. Each student completes an abbreviated psychological evaluation and an interview by the clinical psychologist. The school believes the 12-Step model fits well with their cognitive behavioral approaches, with the belief that if you change thinking, behaviors follow. Individual therapy is provided to students intake personnel feel need additional clinical assistance. It is evident that Family Foundation School is making efforts to strengthen the clinical presence in the program.

I joined the students and faculty for a meeting at noon where many students received awards for competitive participation. The meeting is held daily and covers important events coming up in the day, announcements of important times for activities and granting awards/ recognition for achievements. This tradition serves to provide an important structure

and organization for the day and week and helps develop a sense of community.

This tightly run school has a wide range of treatment approaches. During lunch and dinner, the "Family" eats together and participates in what is referred to as Table Topics. The family, consisting of approximately 30 students and 6 staff, eat together each day and address various family member issues. The day I was there, one student who had progressed well recently "shut down" and the family explored with him what was going on and how to get him to re-engage in the community. The approach was respectful and engaging. I am confident that all students there were genuinely involved in the process. The Table Topics serve to provide a powerfully open and engaging intervention.

In essence, all students at the school are involved in two group counseling sessions daily, one at lunch and one at dinner; both incorporate the 12-Steps. In addition to this process, students have specialty groups including anger management, adoption issues, grief, eating disorder, social fears and group therapy on a weekly basis. The students appeared to be fully engaged and treated the opportunity as an important process.

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Parents must also participate in a parallel program, and are required to attend six 12-Step meetings before they take their student off campus. In addition, they are provided Family Group Counseling, Parent Seminars, support groups and on-line support from other parents.

This 12-Step driven school has a well designed positive peer support model. The system is developed to help each student hold others accountable for their behaviors. Students serve as buddy, shadow and junior sponsors, laying the foundation for the positive peer support. For example, upon enrollment each student is assigned a student "buddy" who helps the new student understand the culture and expectations. The new students are also assigned a student sponsor and an adult sponsor, providing ample opportunity to learn what is expected.

Two students who had been at the school for several months toured me around campus. Both students felt the school was very helpful for them. It was clear they had explored their "higher power" and that this was important and central to their progress. Both students acknowledged that it took several months for them to fully understand the need for them to stay at the school until completion. The students knew all of the 12-Steps and were able to tell me what each one meant and why it was important to them. Additionally, they talked about the school's "Absolute" truths: Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness and Love.

I thought Family Foundation School was well organized and thoroughly understand the effectiveness of the 12-Step model combined with traditional therapy. They capitalize on a rich academic experience and extra-curricular activities needed to help young people exchange negative behaviors, by immersing themselves in life affirming activities.

The school is registered with the NY State Board of Education and accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. They are approved for international students as well.

When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure.

~ Peter Marshal