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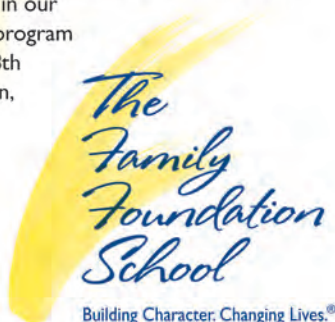
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VISITS...

LITTLE KESWICK SCHOOL

Keswick, Virginia

Terry Columbus, Director

434-295-0457

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www.littlekeswickschool.net

Visit by: Pamela Tedeschi, July 2008

On a gorgeous July morning, a small group of educational consultants toured Little Keswick School. The 45-year-old school sits on 25 bucolic acres and is located seven miles from the historic University of Virginia in Charlottesville. The lush, wooded grounds include a stable, pool and fishing pond that provide a peaceful backdrop for this therapeutic school. The edginess one develops living in the DC area was replaced with a relaxed feeling as my group strolled along the campus.

In the summer of 1963, Robert and Elizabeth Wilson started a small boys' camp. They opened their home to provide study skills and healthy outdoors fun, canoeing and hiking in the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains. After three summers, several parents asked the Wilsons to start a year-round program. In the early years, the boys at Little Keswick School lived in the Wilsons' home and ate at their kitchen table. As the school grew, more buildings and staff were added. Today the committed, knowledgeable staff of 40 works with the 31 boys at the school. Although the Wilsons still live on the school property, Headmaster Marc Columbus and Director Terry Columbus have run the school for many years. Terry has worked at the school for 32 years; her husband joined the school 15 years ago.

I first visited Little Keswick in July 2000. At the time, I was impressed with Little Keswick's program for pre-teen and teenage boys. They accepted and worked with boys who had IQs ranging from the 70s to the 140s. Some of the lower-functioning boys would stay as long as seven years. The old dorms were built many years ago when Little Keswick was still quite young; they resembled camp cabins.

If you have not visited the school in the past year, you need to return. The school has evolved. The dorms and academic buildings have been rebuilt and are state of the art. They no longer accept students with low IQs; their current population has IQs that range from low average to very superior. Terry and Marc have kept the best parts of the program from years ago and improved other areas.

The current population is comprised of complex, complicated boys. They may have LD, NLD, Aspergers, bipolar disorder, anxiety, depression, OCD, ODD, ADD; many of the boys have a

combination of two or more of these problems. These are naive boys, not street-savvy, substance-abusing boys. The age range is from 10-17, though they must be no older than 15 at the time of admittance. The average age is 12 ½, and the average length of stay is about two years.

The clinical team carefully reviews all testing and supporting documents for each applicant. If the student looks appropriate, he is asked to come for an overnight visit before being accepted. This helps to ensure that new students will fit into the community. There is a strong family component and parents must agree to be involved with the program as a condition of their son's acceptance.

The students are housed in three dorms according to their ages. There is also a guided independent living dorm for some of the older, more mature boys. Each dorm is a little community. The inviting dorm rooms house one or two boys each. Each dorm has a sitting room (where students can meet privately with parents or new visiting students can spend the night), a room for the night staff, and a comfortable lounge with board games. The games are used for fun and to build social skills. This homey atmosphere helps each boy to feel comfortable. Nightly dorm meetings serve as group therapy and a time to wind down for the evening. These meetings usually have a theme that enhances goals the boys are trying to achieve. All rules and the reasons behind them are clearly and positively stated at eye level.

Little Keswick School uses points, levels, a token economy and positive reinforcement to help the boys work towards their goals. The residential piece and educational piece are based on a relationship model. Students receive one or two sessions of individual therapy a week. Marty Thomson, the Clinical Director, has developed a wonderful curriculum called *What We Learn: A Guide to Success at Little Keswick*. The handbook is colorful with easy to understand information and amusing pictures. It illustrates several different skills broken into steps and levels.

The school calendar is similar to that of a boarding school with one exception: the boys also attend school for a six-week summer program. All vacations are carefully planned with each student, his family and Little Keswick staff to help the student to practice his new skills at home. The summer program includes a morning of academics and an afternoon of electives.

All of the academic classes are housed in the new building. Each spacious room has four computers, and every class has a lead teacher and an aide with at least a Bachelor's degree. The maximum class size

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is eight boys. The classrooms were cheerful and the students were engaged. All of the boys were dressed neatly in casual summer clothes. A variety of teaching approaches are used to promote academic growth. One group of boys in math class eagerly showed us how to solve the weekly brainteaser. In an English class, the students were participating in a lesson about the parts of speech. Several boys had their hands raised, ready to answer questions. In a third class, two students worked diligently with two adults on individual work. As our group walked through the academic building, I saw calm, interested students in the process of learning—not something one often has the pleasure of observing in the middle of the summer.

The tuition is \$92,000 a year. If the student needs to work with an occupational therapist, a speech therapist or a private tutor, there is an extra cost. We were lucky enough to observe one student in OT. He seemed slightly annoyed that we were interrupting his session and was eager to get back to work.

The electives and clubs are every boy's dream. Daily electives rotate and include horseback riding, art, woodworking and athletics. Clubs are based on students' interests and may include chess, board games, extra woodworking, Boy Scouts, fishing, etc. Little Keswick's basketball and soccer teams play

against other small schools. Weekends may include outdoor adventures, going to a UVA sporting event, shopping for school supplies and fishing on campus. All boys learn to give back to the community through community service.

What is next for the boys when they graduate from Little Keswick? The options vary according to their needs. Some go home to public schools, others attend small independent day schools and others attend a range of boarding schools. One thing is certain: the boys all have a new set of skills to use in school, at home and in life.

Little Keswick is licensed by the Commonwealth of Virginia Interdepartmental Regulation of Children's Residential Facilities, and the Virginia Association of Independent School Educational Facilities. The school belongs to the Small Boarding School Association, the National Association of Private Special Education Centers and is a full member of NATSAP.

About the Author:

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