

MONTCALM SCHOOL FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

A Program of Starr Commonwealth
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Visit by: Lon Woodbury, August 22, 2012

Driving onto the Starr Commonwealth campus is much like entering a park. The 350 acre campus is very green (at least it was while I was there), and the trees, lawn and even the lake are very well maintained. Sprinkled around the property are multiple buildings with varying functions which are all very well maintained. The buildings include an old two-story Victorian building that was the original building when Starr Commonwealth was founded in 1913, many historical brick buildings that date back to the first half of the 20th century, and several modern buildings. All are being used and each has specific functions oriented to helping kids. The overall initial impression is one of calm peaceful harmony.

Starr Commonwealth serves many youth populations. Montcalm School for Boys and Girls is the newest program developed by Starr Commonwealth, established in the year 2000 as a private parent-choice program. The Montcalm students have full use of all the extensive facilities such as an indoor pool, sensory Integration room, gymnasium, Chapel-in-the Woods, High Ropes course, Climbing Wall,

music rooms, racquetball courts, exercise room, and a state-of-the-art outdoor track. The lake is used for canoeing and fishing. Great care is taken to have a minimal interaction between the Montcalm students with the other populations, so the Montcalm students have an experience that is separate and unique to them. The parents of course are communicated with regularly, and are welcome to the campus to visit their child regularly.

During my tour, I had the chance to observe and interact with the students. They presented pretty much as typical teens. They seemed to be engaged, friendly, smiling mostly, and seemed to know what they needed to do at Montcalm and were busy going about that while socializing and enjoying being teens. From what I saw they seemed to feel safe, both physically and especially emotionally.

CONTINUED: MONTCALM/ 8



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MONTCALM

The goal of Montcalm is to normalize the students experience and give them the sense of a home away from home. From what I saw, the school is successful at achieving that environment for them.

Starr Commonwealth has almost a hundred year history of working with teens in trouble, and they are applying that experience to their private parent-choice students enrolled in Montcalm. They have learned a lot through adjusting to the dynamics that are different from public placed students (the difference primarily coming from the active role parents assume in being the decision makers in placement and tuition payment at Montcalm).

The school offers a full academic program which can result in a high school diploma from Montcalm, or they work with the student's home school district to prepare the student to receive a



diploma from their home school. The school offers a broad range of specialized individual academic support to meet the academic needs of students from remedial work to earning college credits for advanced work. Two important aspects were explained to me. First, academics are uninterrupted, showing the high importance given to classes. Second, teachers are an integral part of the treatment team and have an equal say with all the other members of the treatment team. There was not a hint of teachers taking a back seat like happens at some other schools. The newest aspect of Montcalm is what they call Outside In™. This is a specialized social skills program especially designed to help youth on the Autism Spectrum. The primary goal of this is to specifically help those students "learn to self-regulate their emotions and learn coping skills that allow them to overcome missing sensory cues." Although helpful to many students, the Sensory Integration Room is designed to help "students





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who are hyper-or hypo-responsive to environmental stimuli...." This is especially vital for many students on the Spectrum.

The Sensory Integration Room was explained in detail by the Occupational Therapist who was the teacher there and, with all I could see, it looked like a fun room, and especially would look that way to kids. The other interesting conversation I had was with Jeff Cornhill, the Director of Music and Arts. He emphasized the value of the Arts in helping students get in touch with traumas they had undergone, when verbal means are inadequate. He emphasized the philosophy of the school is what they call "Deep Brain Learning" and music and the other arts are one of the best ways a student can access deep hurtful memories. As an example of how powerful the Arts can be in healing troubled souls, he showed me a YouTube video of a song composed and performed by two students. Called "I'm Living Proof," this was two girls telling their story using music as a tool. You can view this for yourself and if you aren't impressed at how it brought their talent and personal story out and send shivers up your spine, maybe you could use a sensitivity session in the Sensory Integration Room.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nz8qIDHkdW0>

The focus of Montcalm School is strength-based, and they have rejected an approach that attempts to just fix deficits, feeling this can be counter-productive or at least ineffective. Their clinical model is what they call "Consilience," explaining this is drawing on the best research from many disciplines. The reasoning is that when practice-based techniques from many disciplines converge, you are more likely to be closer to the truth. They explain that the result is helping



children through "strength-based, child-centered and built around practice-based evidence from successful child care traditions and professional experience." They have been doing this for years, and feel that their understandings are confirmed by "emerging research in behavioral health and neuroscience."

Perhaps the best way to understand their child philosophy is to read the book "Deep Brain Learning: Pathways to Potential with Challenging Youth." Published by Starr Commonwealth and co-authored by Dr. Larry K. Brendtro, PhD, a past president of Starr Commonwealth and pioneer of Positive Peer Culture, Dr. Martin L. Mitchell, current president of Starr Commonwealth, and Dr. Herman J. McCall, former Executive Vice President of Starr Commonwealth, the book provides a rationale and explanation of their understanding of children and how to heal those with problems. They were kind enough to provide me with a copy, and reading it gave me a good insight into the philosophy that informs their work with children.

I have to say that I was very impressed with what I saw and heard, and recommend that for the right child it can be a perfect match.

CHERRY GULCH

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Visit by: Kristie Campbell, BS Psy, IECA, on July 21, 2012

We arrived at Cherry Gulch mid-morning on a hot July day. A couple kids were playing basketball on an outdoor court and a couple

staff members were discussing plans with some visiting parents when we arrived. Cherry Gulch is located on a hill overlooking Emmett, ID, and the view from the top of the property is breathtaking.

We walked up to the main lodge and escaped the dessert heat into the coolness of the administrative building. Dr. Andrew Sapp was waiting for us to begin our tour of his amazing program for young boys. The lobby of the office was filled with backpacks, sleeping bags, and other camping gear. Several boys were preparing to go on a camping trip with their parents and there was an exciting buzz around campus.

We were introduced to all the therapists on staff. Therapists at Cherry Gulch are all PhD or Masters level, and each carries an average case load of eight students. Also on staff is a licensed psychiatrist. All staff utilizes The Anatomy of Peace method for conflict resolution, which was on display on the walls of the conference room when we visited. This method is a great tool for teaching loving ways of resolving conflict for the boys and families at Cherry Gulch.

As we walked, Dr. Sapp explained the student who would excel at Cherry Gulch. Boys are age 10-14 at admission. They often struggle with issues surrounding abuse or neglect, adoption and/or relationship issues. Often there is emotional dysregulation like anger, anxiety, grief and loss, and boys struggle with low self-esteem and a myriad of other issues. Dr Sapp explained that there are two basic types of boys at Cherry Gulch, those who won't, the more defiant boys, and those who can't, those with possible learning and functioning issues.

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CONTINUED: CHERRY GULCH/10