

Ex-worker says Boys Town is becoming ghost town

Editor's Note: This is the first in a two-part series.

By Cynthia Coglianese

OMAHA—Recent changes in the child care program at Boys Town are not in the best interest of the boys there, contend former employees, staff members and teachers.

But the Boys Town administration says the changes are being made in accordance with the times and are in the best interest of the home's 374 boys.

The critics, some of them Boys Town employees and former employees of 20 years, make the following accusations:

- Boys Town is not taking care of enough boys.
- The new program reduces boys to statistics.
- More money is going to outside projects than to the boys.
- Boys Town chooses boys to fit its program.
- The changes are institutionalizing Boys Town.
- There is no love for the boys among the administration and no comradeship among the employees.
- There is a high turn-over rate of family-teachers (couples assigned to homes as surrogate parents).

—Boys Town is becoming a "ghost town."

To these charges, the administration said it expects criticism from former staff members because it is changing the program and introducing a new philosophy in child care.

"Boys Town is a ghost town" are the words of a former employee of nine years at Father Flanagan's Home for Boys.

It is not the kind of ghost town with tumbleweeds and dusty streets, but the former employee feels that other projects at Boys Town are phasing the boys out.

In jeopardy

"With the small number of boys under care (300 to 350 in a home designed to accommodate 1000), the school system is in jeopardy. The vocational school, an excellent facility, is suffering from lack of students," the employee said.

"A visitor touring Boys Town will see only a collection of empty buildings instead of a boys town. Boys Town as a 'City of Little Men' no longer exists. The traditional town concept has been or will be completely eliminated," the former employee said.

Other employees whose jobs were phased out because of a massive program change echo these words. They are reluctant to attach names to their comments because they fear possible repercussions, yet they are willing to speak out on their grievances.

A former employee said a consequence of the new program has been the closing of dining halls, warehouses, the clothing store, butcher shop, medical and dental services, the printing shop and laundry.

Additionally, the employee said, the bank and social services were phased out of Boys Town. Emphasis was placed on a family-type atmosphere. The boys and family-teachers must go into the community to seek services closed on campus.

Said Dr. Elery Phillips, director of Youth Care at Boys Town: "The Youth Care program has changed dramatically from when Father Flanagan lived but I firmly believe that we still aspire to the original goals of Father Flanagan. In fact, I feel that if he were alive today, this is exactly the kind of program he would want."

Hupp agrees

The Rev. Robert P. Hupp, Boys Town director, agrees, adding that because of changes over time, Boys Town has been forced to change its program—sometimes to the dismay of long-time staff members.

Maurice Wolff, 74, taught economics, government and French at Boys Town for 17 years before retiring. He said he remains loyal to Boys Town but he is doubtful of the new administration's capabilities and the new program.

"The only criticism I would have of the place is I don't think they have enough kids. I'm not in a position to criticize, I'm just making a personal opinion," Wolff said from his modest Omaha home. "They're making big mistakes out there. They have only 200 to 350 guinea pigs out there trying out their new program."

Wolff adds: "They have the money and the facilities but they don't accept kids anymore. It's a fact. Boys Town is there to help homeless boys and the administration isn't doing its job."

The Most Rev. Daniel E. Sheehan, president of the Boys Town board of directors and archbishop of the Omaha archdiocese, added: "The changes at Boys Town are in accordance with the times. There is no longer a need merely for food and education like there was years ago. We have a much more complex society now. The new model and direction of Boys Town is more in tune with modern times."

'City of Little Men no longer exists'

The new model was initiated in 1975 by Phillips and Dean Fixen, director of the child care assistance program at Boys Town. Both were behavioral psychology professors at the University of Kansas before they were invited to come to Boys Town by Father Hupp.

Phillips and Fixen designed a program at the University of Kansas to help displaced children adjust in a large society. At Boys Town, a behavioral technology called the family-teaching model replaced the old programs.

Problem solving

"Our philosophy is behavioral, humanistic and a little bit of everything," Phillips said. "We don't know what goes on inside the mind, so we need to teach. If an individual can learn skills, he can solve problems."

Phillips' model contrasts with another kind of psychology he calls the mentalistic, or Freudian psychology.

"That's the psychology where we look at an individual and say we can't change the individual until we find out what is going on inside his mind."

Basically, Phillips' model provides boys with rewards as incentives. Boys negotiate for privileges according to how they behave each day under the scrutiny of their family-teachers.

Family-teachers act as surrogate parents in each of the home's 41 cottages. Eight to 10 boys live in the homes.

In 1946, founder Father Flanagan had big plans for his home. A \$10 million building program was designed to take care of 1,000 boys. Today Boys Town has about 374 boys on campus, with a capacity of 410 boys.

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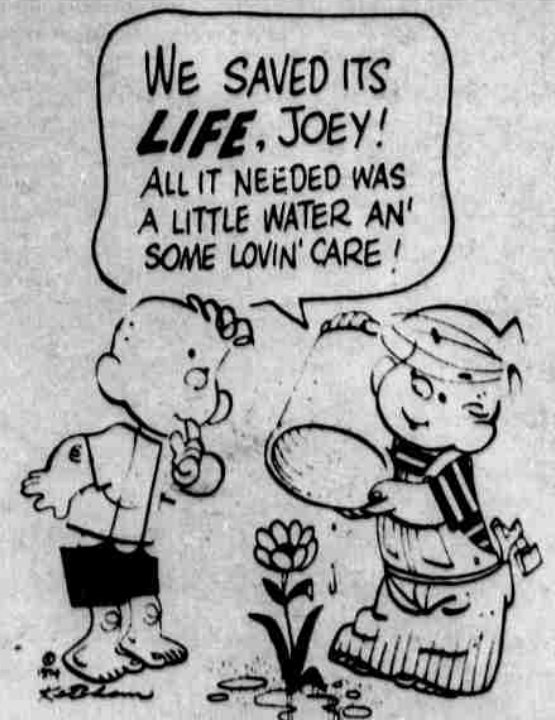
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