

A Day at a CSF Buxmont School

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I began my day at an 8 a.m. staff meeting, and was warmly welcomed by Mark, the staff coordinator, and the counselors, who seemed like a dedicated and enthusiastic group of (mostly) young people. As the day went on, I would see just how dedicated they were. I then set about to be a fly on the wall. It was to be a rather unusual day for the school, but I had no inkling of that yet.

It was the last two weeks of school and “the natives were restless,” as one counselor put it. Arrangements were discussed for the big school picnic planned for the next day. To complicate matters, half of the staff was to leave for a meeting in the afternoon. There was talk of drug testing: One student had reported using marijuana the week before.

I went with Shaun to the “downstairs community’s” morning circle meeting. (I would later learn that the school was divided into two communities—the downstairs and the upstairs—for a total of about 75 kids, in grades 7 through 12.) The downstairs community was ready for the meeting, sitting in chairs in a circle, when Shaun and I arrived. No staff member had told them to do this. They had taken the initiative upon themselves, apparently as a matter of course. I found this impressive, as I knew these kids had been sent there because they had been labeled “problems” by their school district or the courts. Looking around the circle, the kids appeared to represent a wide range—racially, socially and in terms of age and maturity.

There was an atmosphere of happy bustle in the room. “Good morning,” said Shaun to the kids. “Good morning Shaun!” the kids sang back. I took a seat outside the circle and the kids immediately asked me to pull my chair into it, imply-

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ing: “There are no outsiders here.” Right off the bat I felt welcomed by the group, and it felt good. Sitting in the circle, I could no longer feel like a fly on the wall. Looking back on it, I realize how smart this welcoming ritual is. It’s a mechanism by

which newcomers to the school are not left to feel like outsiders, as so many of them must feel in the outside world.

The meeting began with the questions: “Any problems? Announcements?”—not from Shaun, the counselor, as I expected, but from the kids. This was no fluke, I would learn as the day wore on, but central to the school’s philosophy, and indicative of how kids at CSF are asked to take responsibility for themselves. I could see that what was happening here was different from the routine at other schools. How many schools begin the day with kids of all ages meeting in a circle to discuss what’s on their minds?

Just then my eyes were caught by a poster on the wall entitled “How Do You Feel?” illustrated with drawings of faces depicting different emotions: “Bored, Frustrated, Confident, Joyful...” I saw many of the emotions pictured on the poster reflected on the faces of the kids in the circle, and realized that this was a place where they were encouraged to feel, name, own and understand their emotions.

In the meeting, some kids seemed to stand out naturally as leaders and they did much of the talking and questioning of the other kids. “People need to start bringing stuff in for the picnic,” said one girl. Another answered, “I live in a group home so I can only bring one thing.” With that comment, I got my first inkling of what some of the kids’ lives must be like.

The kids now called for introductions, I assume because a stranger was in their

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midst—me. We went around the circle and everyone said his or her name, age and where they were from. Kids displayed varying degrees of alertness and sleepiness, affect and lack thereof, some mumbling, some voluble—just like any other group of teenagers perhaps, except that here, a higher than usual number said that they lived in group homes.



I introduced myself and was greeted with applause and a hearty group “Welcome to CSF!” I was surprised at how much this moved me. Again, I would realize that this was all part of the wise welcoming ritual.

There followed a brief discussion of the school’s “cardinal rules” which seemed to be for the benefit of the new kids in school. Kids can arrive at CSF at any time of year, depending on the circumstances which brought them. Again, the request for this discussion came from kids concerned about their fellow students.

There are five cardinal rules which students learn when they’re given an orientation packet on arrival. 1. No drug or alcohol use. 2. No stealing. 3. No violence or threats of violence to people or property. 4. No leaving school premises without permission. 5. No sexual activity.

A girl now asked a new boy: “What does R.C. mean?” He tried hard to articulate an answer: “When they’re doing something wrong and you find out, and they don’t tell anybody, and if you don’t tell anybody you’ll get in trouble, too.”

In the orientation packet are a few paragraphs entitled “Responsible Concern,” by Donald J. Ottenberg, M.D., which include the following: “If I’m lying to myself or others—tell me. .. and if I’m not strong enough to take it to my group and coun-

selor, you take it there for me. That will be an act of courage and an act of love.”

The new boy had focused on what would happen to him—he’d “get in trouble”—if he didn’t practice responsible concern. He apparently hadn’t been a part of the community long enough yet to understand how he would benefit from the practice, or how he would help others. But—because the other kids were asking him to—he was trying to get it, and that in itself was remarkable to witness.

Some “side conversations” began to pop up in the group—kids talking among themselves. Counselor Jay, who had recently joined the circle, now asked, a bit sternly, “Do we need to go over the norms, or what?” It seemed that even something as relatively minor as talking out of turn during the circle meeting was very important in the world of the school, not out of some arbitrary concept of discipline, but to maintain a steady structure in these kids’ otherwise chaotic lives. (The “group norms,” decided by the group as a whole, include things like: No side conversations, Confront appropriately, No sleeping, Be caring, and Participate.)

Time was now called for the end of the meeting, and the kids—without being told—automatically transformed the room from a meeting place, with chairs in a circle, into a classroom, with tables and chairs set up for learning.

A personable young man of about 13 now took me on a tour of the school. “We set up our classes ourselves,” he told me, confirming what I’d just seen. I asked how the classes were divided up in terms of grades. He said that all grades learned together in each class—be it math, science, English, social studies, music, art or industrial arts: “individual learning,” he called it.

In English class, for instance, they had writing assignments, time lines and vocabulary. In social studies they were learning about the Great Depression. They stayed longer in their classes here than they do in public school—45 minutes as opposed to 35. But, he said, here he didn’t pay attention to time the way he did in

public school. He also told me that here kids helped with school maintenance.

My tour guide now dropped me off with Bob Costello, Director of Training for the International Institute for Restorative Practices, who gave me a thorough overview of the CSF organization, including its history and philosophy. Community Service Foundation was started in 1977 by public school teachers Ted and Susan Wachtel as a school for kids who were having trouble at public school. Now it is three separate organizations which work together: the Community Service Foundation, Buxmont Academy and the International Institute for Restorative Practices. Six schools, all called either Community Service Foundation or Buxmont Academy by the kids, in Bucks, Montgomery and Northampton counties, are licensed by the state of Pennsylvania as private academic schools, as well as providers of drug and alcohol and behavioral counseling.

There is not a lot of emphasis on whether fellow classmates were sent there by the courts or by their school district, said Bob, adding, “It’s one big family.” They stay from several months to years, depending on “who’s paying and what the issues were” that brought them. The or-



ganization also has a residential program of 12 foster group homes. All the programs have been “remarkably successful with difficult kids,” said Bob.

We got into the theory behind restorative practices—the philosophy behind all the schools and programs. When there is high control and low support of kids the result is punitive. In that model, when punishment fails, the solution is to punish harder. At the opposite extreme—high

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support and low control—the outcome is permissive. Both are disrespectful of kids. The ideal is to provide both high control and high support at the same time, the outcome being restorative. “This doesn’t mean no consequences, or that people always like what happens to them,” said Bob, “but they have a say.” It’s “communitarian,” he concluded. Bob told me that they’ve taken restorative practices techniques to public schools with the SaferSanerSchools program. “We have this dream that we’ll put ourselves out of business,” he said.

“What happens if a kid is found with drugs at school?” I asked. First, he said, they ask the kid what happened, and if the presence of drugs is confirmed, police are notified. “We ask the kid who has been affected by what he has done and what he needs to do to make things right,” said Bob. In a group, the child makes an announcement of what he has done and gets feedback. Then he is asked to make a plan to ensure it doesn’t happen again. “What they do is up to them,” said Bob: “That’s why it works.”



I now went to observe an English class. Kids sat at tables working on vocabulary assignments or making timelines for a movie they’d watched: “The Education of Little Tree.” Judy, the teacher, circulated, helping kids in turn. After a while she addressed the class, warning, “There’s far too much in the way of side conversation going on here.” A little later, she announced, “If it gets any louder, we’re going into a group.” A few minutes after that, Judy had the class pull their chairs into a circle for a discussion and asked what was going on.

“I was confronting,” said one boy. “I was talking,” said a few other children. “It an-

noyed Judy that I was talking,” said another. “I was cursing,” said yet another. “When people confront and they’re doing the same thing they’re telling other people not to do, they’re being hypocritical,” commented one girl. “What does this do to the class?” asked Judy. “It breaks up the class,” came the response. Judy then asked for “a quick go-around about what each of you will try to do to make it better.” The replies: “Do my work and get it all done.” “Sit there and be quiet.” “Not get mad and swear at people.” “Do my work and listen to my teacher.” “How about you, Judy?” asked one boy. “I’m going to try to keep my class focused,” she promised.

I had just heard a boy ask his teacher what she was going to do to help make her class function better. She had not gotten angry, accused him of being a smart aleck, or threatened punishment, but had openly and honestly replied to his question. Clearly, not just counselors, but teachers here also employed restorative practices techniques.

As it turned out, a little later in the day the entire school was called together into one big group. I didn’t witness the reasons for this unusual occurrence, but I heard that several arguments had broken out in two or three classes at once. I did sit in on the big group meeting.

One boy suggested that everyone in the circle “take ownership” for what they had done to cause the problems leading to the meltdown. “I called X a thief.” “I swore at X.” “I refused to put down any tables.” “I was confronting people inappropriately.” “I didn’t confront or support.” “I blew off (counselor) Jay,” ... said the kids.

Mark, the staff coordinator, now addressed the group, saying he was very disappointed. “It’s never been this chaotic,” he told them, and it made him sad and hurt. But, he said, he wasn’t going to sit there and scream. “I look around this room,” he said, “and at least 75 percent of the kids do what they need to do and say what they need to say.” He said that several people were repeatedly having problems. He encouraged them not to come to school, if they didn’t want to be there. But,

he said, “if you want to end (the year) successfully, you’re welcome.”

Tracy, a counselor who was pregnant, told the group that in the last few days “people have been hurting me so bad.” She was afraid, she said, because she was “responsible for an unborn human being.”



She continued, “I know you because you’re a student that gets sent here, but I care about you because you deserve to be cared about. ... This is your chance to take control. ... Make your choice or it will be made for you.”

After the meeting was over, I saw one of the boys who had been acting up apologize to Tracy, saying he felt very bad for hurting her. He said he knew how wrong it was because his girlfriend was pregnant too. It seemed very important to him that Tracy accept his apology. It didn’t appear that he was just going through the motions for effect. “Your body language was very threatening,” Tracy told him, making sure to give him feedback about his behavior.

Later I asked the staff what they thought had caused so many problems that day. Restlessness and fear about the imminent end of the school year was the consensus.

After lunch I attended a group feedback session, a structured process whereby kids passed a ball around and commented openly to each other, one at a time. I found this extremely moving: “When you help other people I feel proud of you.” “When you take a leadership position I feel confident you’ll do a good job.” “When you treat me like a human being I feel good because not that many people treat me like a human being.” “When you rush me I feel frustrated.” Each piece of feedback got a reply, none of which, to my amazement, was defensive: “I’m sorry.” “Thank you.”

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I was also amazed to see that the group made sure that everyone got to give and get feedback, that nobody was left out. These kids clearly cared about each other very much. I was really beginning to see how restorative practices worked.

I now interviewed several students one on one, asking them how they had come to the school and what it had done for them. One boy, 16, said that he had been at the school for two years. He had been "acting up" at his old school and got caught with drugs and a gun. CSF had helped him, he said, because it "changed my anger" and taught him to accept the consequences of his actions. "When you get in trouble here," he said, "you get to bring it up in group, make anger plans." Next year he was going back to public school and hoped to graduate and get a job in construction. "I'm ready," he said. "I know right from wrong. I know what I gotta do." There are better things in life than "the streets," he added. The most helpful thing he had learned? "Not to let people get me angry. I'll just talk about it instead."

Another boy, 14, had been at CSF since January and loved it. He'd been out of control at his old school but here, he said, "if one of my friends confronts me, I stop." "I used to run around and beat up stuff with baseball bats," he said. "Now I've figured out I can take care of my stuff and seek positive attention."

A 16-year-old girl told me she had been at the school for nine months. Before that she hadn't been to school in six years. "I got into drugs and alcohol—whatever I could get my hands on," she said. "In the beginning I hated it here," she admitted, but now she liked it. She had learned that she was an alcoholic and took part in an intensive CSF after-school program. She lived in a CSF group home, spending weekends with her family. She had been clean for two months, having relapsed at six months. "My father is an alcoholic," she said, "And I turned to it to hide my feelings."

She said that she had received a great deal of support at CSF, but no "negative attention," something she had previously sought out. "I started being positive and

I've been getting praise up and down," she said. She was studying for her G.E.D. with a CSF tutor and hoped to go on to community college. Restorative practices had helped her get along better with her family and "respect myself, most of all," she said, adding: "They told me nobody can love me until I love myself."

Another girl, 17, told me that she had been at CSF for a little over a year. She



had been in juvenile detention and was on probation for truancy, bringing a weapon (an Exacto knife), and "a little bag of weed that wasn't mine" to school. She had been in a group home but now lived at home again. She liked it at CSF because she felt safe and always had someone to talk to. She didn't want to go back to public school, although that was what seemed to be planned for her. She was afraid she would be behind when she got back. But she definitely wanted to go to college, adding: "I'm very serious. I want to be all I can be."

Asked how CSF was different from juvenile detention, she said: "All I gained there was weight." Detention had made her worse — "more pissed off; it gave me an 'F the world' attitude." Then she went to a group home where she was "breathing and eating CSF for ten months." She still got mad, she said, but now she cared about things — her friends, her family, her future. "I didn't even pay attention that I had a future," she said: "Not even two minutes later, not even tomorrow." Now, she said, she was "a totally different person."

I interviewed a few more kids. Only one said she wasn't happy at CSF. She hadn't been there very long, and seemed to be having a hard time of it. She lived in a group home, where they checked her for

drugs all the time. She said that she had changed a lot, and that she was "not touching drugs and not fighting." She blamed other kids for the fact that "my name keeps coming up in a lot of stuff." She was upset that things weren't working out at CSF, but wished she were home with her mother. She had been given a choice: to sign and fulfill a "behavior contract" enabling her to stay, or to leave. She wasn't sure which she would do, but she hadn't made the decision to leave. It seemed there was hope for her yet.

At the end of the school day, I attended a staff meeting where the counselors discussed what had happened that day, in depth. "If the kids only knew how everything they said and did is analyzed, what would they think?" wondered one staff member. I brought up what I had noticed about the way certain kids seemed to be natural leaders. A counselor had an interesting response: "A lot of the kids who end up being leaders—their leadership qualities are what got them in trouble, but it's the same thing that can get them out of trouble."

I spent a whole day at CSF watching classes, circles, groups, feedback sessions and staff meetings and interviewing kids, many of whom seemed to have been on a collision course with disaster. Who knows what might have happened to them if they hadn't been assigned to this place, where people not only cared about them but had figured out a specific, structured way to help them change their destructive — and self-destructive — behavior?

Here, kids weren't being punished for their behavior. They had come from systems where that had been tried and hadn't worked. Instead, they had come to a place which provided both control and support in equal measure. They were learning a concrete way to talk about and deal with their problems, with the help of their fellow classmates and staff members.

Above all, I felt the kids there were very lucky to have ended up at CSF. They were learning that, no matter where and what they had come from, they themselves were the only ones who were really responsible for their lives and able to change them for the better. How many of us never realize that? ☉