



CHILD-FRIENDLY FAITH PROJECT

HEALING THROUGH TRUTH **A Proposal Submitted to Cal Farley's Boys Ranch** **April 21, 2017**

“Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going.”

— John 8:14

Introduction

From the Catholic Church to Baylor University, many institutions have faced allegations of having abused or neglected young people. Very often, organizations have publicly admitted and apologized for maltreatment even when misdeeds took place many years ago. But these admissions have often come after years of denials, foot-dragging, victim-blaming, expensive lawsuits, forced resignations, and negative publicity. In the end, those embattled organizations—having delayed the process of engaging with survivors and conducting investigations—then faced the unpleasant and costly task of having to repair their public image.

What more and more organizations are realizing is that voluntary and prompt acknowledgement of offenses is a better alternative to denial, evasion, and opposition. In fact, organizations that take such initiative—which may pose some short-term challenges—actually can end up saving money and strengthening important relationships in the long-run. “A well-timed apology can defuse resentment, heal the parties, reduce litigation, and restore the relationship to a new footing so it sometimes emerges stronger than it was before,” writes John Kador in *Effective Apology: Mending Fences, Building Bridges, and Restoring Trust*.

The proposal that follows is an attempt by the Child-Friendly Faith Project to assist in a process of reconciliation between alumni of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch who are survivors of abuse and neglect and the institution. The information provided was gleaned from interviews of alumni who graduated in the early 1970s and early 1990s.

Abuse and Neglect at Cal Farley's Boys Ranch

Cal Farley's Boys Ranch today shines as a beacon for children whose parents and legal guardians are unable or unwilling to care for them. Using an esteemed therapeutic model and hiring highly qualified and caring staff, it is dedicated to caring for children so they thrive, feel safe, and are prepared for success on the outside. In addition, Boys Ranch provides resources, such as housing, for graduates.

Tragically, however, many children who grew up at Boys Ranch from its early days through at least the early 1990s, did not receive these benefits, and instead, were subjected to violence, trauma, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and neglect.

It took me over forty years to come to grips with the abuse. I'll never understand what we did wrong to deserve the abusive treatment that was so prevalent in those days: hitting, punching, slapping, choking, kicking, and roping children from a horse and dragging them back to the ranch and then beating them. [As adults] we were either too afraid to say anything or more afraid of what we might do if we dwelled on it too much. In fact, for the most part, we ran from it for the better part of our lives, refusing to admit, or even letting anyone know we had lived there. In the end, I chalked it up to being a man and having to deal with it. I think I've done a pretty good job with that, but it will always be with me. I still have a hard time dealing with or trusting anyone in authority. The only thing that has saved me was being able to have my own children and provide them with the love and respect that I had so longed for. I thank God everyday for that."

— Alumnus of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch

The maltreatment included physical abuse (severe and injurious corporal punishment), emotional abuse (terrorizing and humiliating), medical neglect, sexual abuse perpetrated, and exploitation (unpaid labor under harsh conditions, requiring boys to give tours to and solicit donations from visitors, and using residents' likenesses in photos to market the ranch).

Examples of overly harsh punishments include beating boys with a belt (sometimes up to sixty lashes), striking the genitals with an implement, tying a boy to a horse and dragging him along the ground, punching in the face and stomach, kicking a boy with heavy boots while he was on the ground, and banging a boy's head on a metal door with great force. Boys were beaten by men who weighed up to three times their body weight. One staff member was known to have loaded his belt with coins to make the blows more painful. Another whipped boys "until we bled through our pockets."

Young children were not excluded from harsh punishment. One survivor described an incident that occurred when he was about six years old. On a cold day, his dorm parent took him outside and made him sit inside a garbage bin with a brush and ordered him to clean the rust on the inside. As if this weren't punishment enough, the dorm parent then poured water through holes in the top of the bin and ordered other boys to beat the can with sticks for a long period of time.

We were told in church to ask God to enter our hearts and ask for His love. I went outside, and on my hands and knees, asked God to come into my heart and begged him to not let me wake up again. The next morning, I decided I would never trust God again. I was five years old.

— Alumnus of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch

Boys Ranch not only failed to keep children safe from abusive staff, it also failed to protect them from violence perpetrated by other boys. Some children were housed in dorms where they were subjected to sexual abuse by older boys and frequent violent attacks. In addition, female staffers engaged in sexual acts with boys.

Boys were permitted next to no comfort and were not medically treated for injuries caused by staff. Despite the fact that many boys who came to Boys Ranch had previously suffered abuse and neglect at home, behavioral and cognitive problems were "treated" with authoritarian disciplinary tactics and violence. Boys were further traumatized by having to watch other boys be abused or animals be tortured or killed by staff and other boys.

No safety net

Boys Ranch now makes a concerted effort to provide assistance to alumni, such as therapy and housing. But years ago, graduates were given few resources. Despite the untold numbers of hours they worked on the ranch, they left with only a small amount of cash. Many had not been taught vocational skills, nor did they have a place to live or a job waiting for them. "There was no safety net," one alumnus recalled.

Considering the lack of resources given to these young men and the years of abuse they had endured at Boys Ranch, it's no wonder that many alumni have struggled with addiction and mental illness, including PTSD. Some have turned to crime; others have committed suicide. In this way, boys didn't leave Boys Ranch as better men, they left as broken men.

Differing Accounts

Some alumni have said they did not experience abuse or do not remember bad things happening at Boys Ranch. In fairness, not all boys were mistreated. One alumnus described what he called “two Boys Ranches,” a system in which some children were sent to safe dorms while others who were deemed more difficult to control were sent to dorms run by tougher dorm parents. In addition, the sons of staff members enjoyed privileges other boys did not.

Staff kids had a wonderful time. They didn't have to work everyday for free. They didn't have to get up and go to work when it was night. We cooked their food, provided their milk, waited their tables and then had to clean up their mess when they ate. While they went home and watched cartoons, we had to wash their dishes.

— Alumnus of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch

Healing Through Truth as a Response

Boys Ranch has remained largely silent on the abuses of the past. It's likely that some believe that abuse was not systemic but the work of rogue staff or “a few bad apples.” But it appears that abuse was not accidental but widespread, if not by design. Stories told by alumni throughout the years describe a similar type of violence, cruelty, and maltreatment perpetrated by employees who were responsible for their care. Therefore, it appears that Boys Ranch maintained a culture that promoted harsh discipline and perhaps even found violence to be an acceptable approach to childrearing.

Some may say “it was a different time” and that Boys Ranch staff simply “didn't know any better.” (It certainly appears that staff weren't trained on child development or abuse prevention.) But while these statements may explain why boys suffered abuse, they do not excuse it. In fact, there can be no justification for abuse, especially at an institution that stakes its reputation on a commitment to care for children's wellbeing and ensure their safety.

How should Boys Ranch respond to these allegations? Survivors ask that the institution take the courage step of embracing the truth in a timely manner. This means opening up the conversation and engaging with survivors. It means understanding that some alumni who were not abused at Boys Ranch will find allegations of abuse upsetting and helping them to understand that each ex-rancher's “testimony” is, indeed, “valid.”

It means showing the world that Boys Ranch upholds its value of “leadership and accountability” by doing what it can to bring healing to survivors and to the organization as a whole.

Here is what a “healing through truth” approach could accomplish:

- restore dignity and honor to alumni who suffered maltreatment so they finally feel heard and better able to move on with their lives
- end infighting among alumni groups who are at odds about how to talk about the past
- strengthen Boys Ranch’s image as an institution that opposes abuse and cares for children, alumni, families, and community

There comes a time in the history of nations when their peoples must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future. . . . Until we fully confront that truth, there will always be a shadow hanging over us and our future as a fully united and fully reconciled people. It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together.

— Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, 2008
apologizing for the country’s mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples

Specifically, Boys Ranch Abuse Survivors ask that Boys Ranch do the following:

Make a Public Statement. Survivors ask that Boys Ranch publicly and fully acknowledge that children under its care have suffered abuses, explain how survivors have been impacted, and describe how it will apologize to survivors and seek restitution. Boys Ranch could communicate this message by alerting the media, sending out a mass email, and creating a page on its website dedicated to this issue. Also, survivors ask that Boys Ranch make a concerted effort to locate alumni who have lost touch with the organization so they can receive the information being disseminated.

Make Public Information Truthful. Survivors ask that Boys Ranch review its marketing material, including content that appears on its website, to ensure that information about the past is truthful and not misleading. This includes removing tributes made to abusive

administrators and employees, including street signs on Boys Ranch’s property. Boys Ranch could devote special attention to former staff who opposed abusive practices. Finally, Boys Ranch should no longer market itself with photos of alumni unless it first gets permission of the subjects or their families if deceased.

Utilize Best Abuse Prevention Practices. Survivors ask that Boys Ranch investigate past and present employees who have been accused of abusing children, and, if it suspects that allegations have merit, report them to authorities and take proper action against those employees. And, if it does not already, Boys Ranch should make public its abuse prevention policies and procedures.

Set Up an Abuse Survivors Fund. Survivors ask that Boys Ranch set up a fund—one that would be overseen by both Boys Ranch representatives and survivors—to pay for services and assistance needed by those who were abused or neglected while living at Boys Ranch and work with survivors on the criteria for compensation.

Host a “Reunion of Healing.” Survivors ask that Boys Ranch host an event where survivors could reconnect with old friends and receive a personal apology from Boys Ranch. In addition, Boys Ranch could re-introduce them to the facility of today, perhaps by giving them a tour. For alumni who cannot attend, Boys Ranch could communicate this information by phone.

It’s time for Cal Farley’s Boys Ranch to reconcile its painful past with the compassionate work it does today and bring together alumni who have been both helped and hurt by the institution. In doing so, Boys Ranch would show the outer community that it truly cares about enriching the human spirit of all who live, or have lived, under its care.

We look forward to hearing your response to this proposal. Please do so by contacting us no later than May 8, 2017.

Sincerely,

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