"A Commonwealth Founded on Love"
Interpersonal Spaces at Floyd Starr’s School for Boys and Girls

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**ABSTRACT**

In 1913 Floyd Starr founded Starr Commonwealth in Albion, Michigan for homeless, neglected, and delinquent boys. Unlike contemporary reformatories called “defect” schools by Starr, as they did boys more harm than good"), Starr Commonwealth was established with the belief that “there is no such thing as a bad boy.” This belief translated into employing staff and bringing exceptional individuals to the school whose presence made the students feel safe and worthy. For example, Starr hired conscientious objectors, men who were deemed deficient in manhood during World War II, to perform reformatory action at the school. This trust created a space of open connection, reinforcing Floyd’s belief in the nonexistence of a ‘bad boy’ to the students under his care.

By introducing the boys to famous people such as Helen Keller, Dorothy Maynor, Rabindranath Tagore, and George Washington Carver, Starr aimed to expose students to examples of human excellency and to elevate their sense of self-worth. Starr’s insistance on open houses for every cottage and his own presence as ‘Uncle Floyd’ also generated a familial feeling in the school that was lacking in the boys’ lives.

My research explores how these three spheres of relationship opened interpersonal spaces at the school that encouraged boys to feel secure in the world. I read Faith Made Visible by Dr. Keith J. Fenimore, the history of Starr Commonwealth published by the school in 1988, a collection of Floyd Starr’s primary correspondences at the Bentley Historical Library, James E. Seid’s doctoral thesis, “The History of the Internal Organization of the State Reform School for Boys at Westborough, Massachusetts, 1846-1874,” testimonies of alumni, and other materials to be provided by Amy Reimann, Director of Archives at Starr Commonwealth. I also conducted a visit of the school itself to better understand the atmosphere Floyd created in Albion. I respect to find a direct correlation between the atmosphere and understanding, love and respect with which Floyd, the staff, and guests treated the boys and the school’s astounding success. This information will help develop an exhibition on the history of Starr Commonwealth for its 100th anniversary in 2013. I interacted with one other student studying the significance of architecture and landscaping at the school; our team will showcase the achievement of Starr Commonwealth and the success of Floyd Starr’s methods in creating a safe space for the students.

**METHODS**

- The history of the Starr Commonwealth’s history of Starr Commonwealth published by the school in 1988, a collection of Floyd Starr’s primary correspondences at the Bentley Historical Library, James E. Seid’s doctoral thesis, “The History of the Internal Organization of the State Reform School for Boys at Westborough, Massachusetts, 1846-1874,” testimonies of alumni, and other materials to be provided by Amy Reimann, Director of Archives at Starr Commonwealth. I also conducted a visit of the school itself to better understand the atmosphere Floyd created in Albion. I respect to find a direct correlation between the atmosphere and understanding, love and respect with which Floyd, the staff, and guests treated the boys and the school’s astounding success. This information will help develop an exhibition on the history of Starr Commonwealth for its 100th anniversary in 2013. I interacted with one other student studying the significance of architecture and landscaping at the school; our team will showcase the achievement of Starr Commonwealth and the success of Floyd Starr’s methods in creating a safe space for the students.

**OBJECTIVES**

- To discover and explore direct correlations between interpersonal spaces and the success of rehabilitation at Starr Commonwealth.
- To compile a bank of information on the history of the school to be used in a published paper documenting the school’s success.
- To present research for the 100th Anniversary of Starr Commonwealth.

**NOTABLE ALUMNUS**

Dr. Wiley Brownlee - Starr Commonwealth Student 1942-1944 - Earned his B.A. in Education at the University of Michigan, and obtained his M.A. & Ph.D. from Michigan State University - Taught students at military bases around the world for the Department of Defense - Returned to Michigan to work with the Department of Education as Deputy Superintendent of the Ann Arbor Public Schools.

**TIMELINE**

1589
1853
1902
1903
1913

**Family & Home**

- Group therapy

**Education & Work**

- Current success rate; quote from alumnum, mention head psychologist?
- field trips to sanatoriums, sports (mention the famous), art/music (brueker-auction), playground, open campus

**Success & Love**

- Note on conscientious objects and the hard work boys were required to do in chores etc.

**Social & Play**

- • field trips to sanatoriums, sports (mention the famous), art/music (brueker-auction), playground, open campus

**CONCLUSION**

The accounts, histories, testimonies, and lives that have come forth from Starr Commonwealth all point to one key factor in the success of the school: open love and respectful treatment. Floyd was brought up by a foster family who taught him the value and power of both love and understanding, and the outside influences in his life, such as Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, shaped these convictions. Floyd, in turn, provided the same love and understanding to ‘his boys’ from the many provisions he made for their excellence. Aided by a trained staff working with housemothers and himself as ‘Uncle Floyd’ to fill the void many boys had in place of family and reintroduced their self-worth made absent by either abuse or neglect. He reinforced this self-worth by teaching the boys skills and culture they could employ usefully and gainfully in their lives; the schedule of chores, workshops (such as carpentry, musicology, and artistry), and educational opportunities he set for the boys are prime examples of this. Last but not least, he completed his provision of “an environment full of love and activity” with famous visitors, team sports, a large nature filled campus, and play, a vital nutrient to the growth and creativity for all children. With this foundation, Floyd taught them trust, diligence, responsibility, and gave them a chance to make something of their lives.

This is the source of the outstanding success rate of Starr Commonwealth, even to this day.