



# DARDEN HILL

*A "last chance" at rehabilitation for disturbed boys, this very special school enjoys remarkable success.*

by Henry R. Hubben

Seven years ago Darden Hill Ranch School opened and began providing unconventional but effective solutions for boys for whom convention had failed.

Located at Dripping Springs, Darden Hill is a residential therapeutic treatment center for emotionally disturbed boys. For many of these boys, Darden Hill is a last chance at rehabilitation before being institutionalized in state hospitals. The sense of purpose and serious intent demanded by this last chance permeates the boys and staff alike at Darden Hill.

"We tell the boys that life is too precious for us to find any time in which to be crazy," says Darden Hill Director Charles Campise.

Teacher and co-administrator Rosemary Bullard agrees: "We don't warehouse children. The day they come here, they start working their way out."

Darden Hill Ranch School was licensed on Sept. 6, 1973, by the Texas State Department of Human Resources to serve 15 boys, age six and older, as a residential treatment child-care center. Sponsoring agency for the school is the Burke Foundation, a private, non-profit, tax-exempt corporation. Board members of the Burke Foundation are Charles Campise (Austin), Rosemary Bullard (Driftwood), Ezelle Petmecky (Dripping Springs), Anthony Cangelosi

(San Antonio), Art Millecam (San Marcos), Ralph Gonzales (San Marcos), Marvin Altenhoff (San Marcos) and John Burke, Jr. (Driftwood).

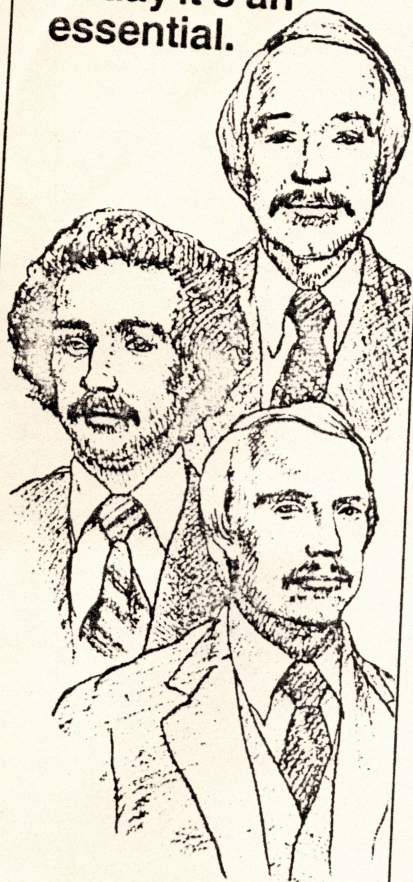
The goal and purpose of Darden Hill is to be a hill country ranch school for boys and to provide those boys with a practical program for the remediation of learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral problems. The school does not work with "adjudicated delinquents." The external manifestation of an emotional or behavioral disturbance may be a slight retardation, disfunction or bad impulse control. The boys are emotionally disturbed but not psychotic. Non-psychotic generally means that the boy is in touch with his reality and his environment most of the time. Basically they are boys whose negative behavior has made them unwanted or unmanageable in all of their previous situations.

During the seven year history of the school, the boys' IQs have ranged from 65 to 140. They come from parents who have had to give them up, from orphanages, from failed foster-care matchings and from 90-day observation periods at the state hospital. About 40 percent are orphans. Some are victims of abusive and violent adult behavior. Says Campise, "We are specifically organized to deal with the sick child."

The job of the Darden Hill staff is to rehabilitate these boys back to what Campise calls "a more independent setting." For most of the boys, that more independent setting will be another foster home or orphanage until they are 18. Once they reach 18, the boys are turned loose from state custody. Some of them may then be eligible for a federal program for dependent adults, SSI. "Ninety-nine percent of the youngsters that come through here are not going to end up on SSI" contends Campise. "Every time we get a child off the welfare rolls, we are saving the federal government and the state in excess of 10 grand a year every year for the rest of their lives."

Starting with a \$2000 loan and only four boys, Darden Hill struggled for the first couple of years. The staff took little or no pay, getting room and board and a token salary. Several of the school's buildings were built by the staff and boys. Private citizens have been invaluable in providing the school with everything from desks to washing machines. "The program depends continually upon the generosity of people who are interested in what we are doing," emphasizes Campise. Darden Hill's state funding is based upon what the school spends each year. As more private contributions are received, the school can

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Joe Picciandra

spend more, and the state funding goes up accordingly. There are no maids or cooks at Darden Hill; each staff member does several jobs. Campise does all his own secretarial work; his office is a tiny pre-fab building just large enough to hold a desk, a chair and a couch. Joe Picciandra Remelos of Austin is presently affiliated with the program for the purpose of enlisting support for Darden Hill from businesses in the Central Texas area.

The school is built upon ranch land leased from Mr. and Mrs. John Burke, who made the land available in 1973 when the school was in the planning stages. The Burkes lived on campus until the increasing number of boys made dorm space a problem, at which time they moved to another part of the ranch at their own expense, leaving their original house for dorm space.

The method of treatment used at Darden Hill is called "milieu" therapy. In the words of Campise, "The milieu is the entire setting, psychological and material setting, and the interactions that take place between youngsters and the environment."

In practice, the boys are taught to encounter success in all phases of their daily life at Darden Hill. They generally arrive at the school with a very negative self-image, not surprising considering the sequence of failure and displacement they have gone through. "We use the language that some boys do bad things, but there is no such thing as a bad boy," affirms Campise. This attitude is a vital underlying influence at Darden Hill.

From the time they wake up in the morning to the time they go to bed at night, the boys are busy — playing, going to the on-campus classroom, encountering challenges and learning what Campise calls "a healthy way of living day to day." Motivated externally,

the boys learn to experience and accept success. Over a period of time, they begin to internalize these successes, thereby raising their own self-image and making it easier to encounter success the next time.

This process of internalization is one of the elements that makes Darden Hill unique. The real therapy is done by the boy himself, upon himself, in response to the external environment. There is no feeling of "head-shrinkers" lurking about at Darden Hill. "Youngsters learn by habit," says Campise. "They learn good habits and by learning good habits they are unlearning bad habits. We are not psychiatrically oriented. We spend a great deal of time getting the kids to go through the motions, to perform." Thus a primary function of the staff is to provide role models and leadership, to set limits and to be supportive when the boys' own egos are not up to the demands that their changing behavior is making upon them. "They know that if they get out of control, we are here to stop them, to make them get control of themselves," states Campise.

The basic structure of the school is determined by the Group System Dynamic, a five-level "milieu" therapy program by which each boy, according to his own behavior moves up or down from level to level. "The child lives the Group System Dynamic because we have designed each level to be a life style," says Campise. The boys move up or down according to three basic points of evaluation: hygiene, chores and behavior. Depending upon what level a boy is on, he will be served his meals first or last, will get more or less allowance, have more freedoms on campus and will live in a certain dorm.

"We are not an educational institution. We are a life education experience," explains Campise. However, he

adds, most of the boys are three to five years behind in school when they come to Darden Hill. "In our classroom they learn how to go to school." The boys go to school 12 months a year. No academic grades are given. Instead, the boys are graded on such things as class attitude, participation, promptness and taking care of their belongings.

"It's 'in' to be in school here," says Rosemary Bullard. "The students have to earn the right to go to school and stay in school."

Basic skills are taught informally through practical applications. For instance, the students have a time each day when they drink hot chocolate and discuss world affairs. They'll find Iran or Afghanistan or Texas on the map and discuss the political situation, the people, the history, the geography, etc. "You can even teach math off a map," Bullard says convincingly. "How many people live in Iran, how big is Afghanistan, how hot or cold is it there, any number of things." Campise adds proudly that Mrs. Bullard has taught boys three years worth of school in one year's time.

The students who have shown ability to deal with the psychological and intellectual demands of the Darden Hill school are trained by Mrs. Bullard to enter Dripping Springs public school. This

training period lasts about a month and begins with taking the boy to football games and school events, introducing him to teachers and other students, making school look pretty good. Then Mrs. Bullard tells them the truth, "Dripping Springs is in full support of us, but they tell me to leave my trouble makers at home." After the boy has been made aware of the positive and the negative aspects of public school, the training begins in earnest.

Mrs. Bullard "play acts" public school with the boys. "I tell them we're just play acting, and I push them to their absolute limit of delayed gratification." Gradually Mrs. Bullard replaces the usual immediate gratification rewards such as cookies with social reinforcers such as compliments and verbal encouragement. The transition is a difficult one to make, and the boys progress by fits and starts. The process is very demanding of their emotional stability.

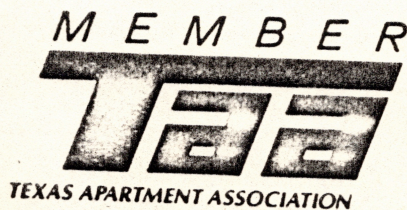
A key figure in the boys' successful transition into public school and hence "real" life is a teacher at Dripping Springs named Mrs. Ezelle Petmecky. Mrs. Petmecky's job is to work with the Darden Hill boys. When they first enter public school, they boys are in Mrs. Petmecky's class. When the pressure in other classes becomes too great, they can go to Mrs. Petmecky's class. Cam-

rise and Mrs. Bullard see the work and cooperation of Mrs. Petmecky and the Dripping Springs staff as being a crucial link in getting the boys back into the social mainstream. The completion of one full semester at Dripping Springs is a prime indicator that the boy is ready to leave Darden Hill.

Some of the activities that keep these boys busy "from the time they get up to the time they go to bed" include a physical education program, a garden in which every boy gets at least one row, carpentry classes, farm animals that the boys help take care of, an annual trip to Six Flags or AstroWorld that the boys raise money for, and their own boy scout troop, Troop 111, Capital Area Council.

Darden Hill offers its boys a fighting chance to be productive and take part in the world. The elements for success are in place and working: a staff-to-boy ratio of 1:4 (the state requires only 1:8); a campus that is about as uninstitutional as could be hoped; and an experienced staff that is there to help the boys leave instead of just maintaining them. "Our efforts are about 85 percent successful over a longer period of time," states Campise with obvious pride. Darden Hill, boys and staff alike, plan to continue to experience success for a long time to come. □

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