

Boys Town High School

Grades 9–12
Boys Town, Nebraska
Private/Suburban
Enrollment 384

Bringing Help, Healing, and Hope

Every old-time-film buff knows the story of *Boys Town*, the famed classic starring Spencer Tracy as the spirited Father Flanagan, who believed “there is no such thing as a bad boy.” Now, 90 years after the priest founded Boys Town, a home for troubled boys in rural Nebraska, his dream lives on at Girls and Boys Town, where at-risk students are becoming productive citizens, transforming their own lives, and extending help to others.

Thoughtful reflection is a constant at Girls and Boys Town. And in no tradition is it more prominent than at the high school baccalaureate ceremony. Granted, all the conventional trappings of graduation are there—the formal procession, the stirring strains of *Pomp and Circumstance*, the stately magnificence of Dowd Chapel—but missing are the usual platitudes about commencement as the “beginning of a new life.” In their stead are the graduates’ personal reflections. Always honest and often wrenching, these reflections attribute the

“beginning” of their new lives to their stay at Girls and Boys Town.

Brad, who admits he was “tricked into coming here,” thanks Girls and Boys Town for teaching him “how to be a real man” and for taking care of his sister “when she was sick with cancer.” Anca, who was abandoned by her parents, is grateful to her family-teachers,

Mac and Kerry Stewart, who showed her “what love is all about.” Tiffany, who recalls that she “would turn to drugs and alcohol” to ease her emotional pain, explains how the school helped her deal with the deaths of her mother and father.

Loneliness, fear of reaching out, and disappointment with themselves and others are negative feelings that marked the students’ days before they came here. Brian, who says “I had no direction to go but down,” now has “the motivation and the means to strive to go further . . . beyond all expectations.” Amanda, who survived the hardship of her mother being in a coma, reflects, “What Girls and Boys Town has done for me is to help me learn to trust again. It has helped me dream a dream and be able to live that dream.” These reflections, representing just a small part of the graduates’ testimonials, illustrate the bonding that occurs here, a bonding so powerful that it has changed lives.

Those in Need of Healing

When Father Edward Flanagan set out in 1917 to establish a home for troubled boys, first in a rented Omaha house and later in the larger Overlook Farm, he clearly was a man with an extraordinary vision. Nine decades later, his vision—to *bring help, healing, and hope*—is still influencing others; the organization, now called Girls and Boys Town (girls were admitted in 1979), is America’s largest privately funded organization serving severely at-risk, abused, abandoned, and neglected children. Although it has been co-ed for more than a quarter of a century, the high school itself is still called Boys Town High School, because it is located in the village of Boys Town. It is virtually impossible to consider the high school as distinct from the Residential Therapeutic Center which surrounds it—physically and philosophically—since school administrators, therapeutic and clinical directors, support services staff, teachers, and family-teachers work together as one unit to help the students. Girls and Boys Town (GBT) is the name of the entire complex.

Father Flanagan may have believed that “there is



Boys Town students “Jump Rope for Hearts” in a charity fundraiser.

no such thing as a bad boy,” but many of the agencies that refer students to Boys Town seem to think otherwise. According to Bob Gehringer, the superintendent of schools and high school principal, students who arrive at GBT generally have already failed in three placements. Statistically, 51 percent of them have aggression problems; 27 percent experience depression; 42 percent have been physically and/or sexually abused, or suffer from neglect or abandonment; 64 percent have had problems in school; 47 percent have a history of substance abuse; 36 percent are out of parental control; and 51 percent have prior arrests.

A visitor, aware of the students’ histories, might expect to find them heavily tattooed, sporting spiked purple hair and multiple body piercings. However, just the opposite is true. Students, dressed appropriately, are friendly, happy, outgoing, and quite articulate about themselves and about the positive impact that GBT has had on their lives. It is not unusual for students to come up to visitors, introduce themselves, welcome them, and shake hands. All students live in the picturesque village of Boys Town, in Tudor-style homes run by family-teachers who act as counselors and surrogate parents. Rob Wright and his wife find their role as family-teachers challenging but rewarding: “Running a home with eight boys is not easy, but in many ways it is an ideal set-up. Just think ... the home and the school being absolutely supportive of each other.” Although the family-teachers serve as parents for the children during their stay, GBT includes biological parents in their efforts and works on plans for eventual reunification whenever feasible. Parents and relatives complete Common Sense Parenting classes and study with the family-teachers and clinical consultants to learn skills they need in order to help their children become successful upon returning home.

Planting the Seeds of Recovery

The transformation from rebellious youth to productive citizens is not an easy journey; it requires great effort on the part of everyone. “When the kids come here, most of them are angry,” says orientation director Maciej Novak. Athletic director Brent Robinson joins in, “They enter without socially acceptable values, attitudes, and behaviors, because they have not learned them.” The first step is a two-

The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Boys Town High School:

- A 16-year longitudinal follow-up study (2006) indicates that the percentage of GBT youth who have positive outcomes in adulthood is consistent with the percentage for the U.S. population at large.
- The study showed that the longer a student stayed in the program (18 months or more), the more positive the long-term results.
- The group that received care for 18 months or longer was similar to the national norm in terms of completing high school or pursuing higher education, not being involved in domestic abuse, and being currently married; they exceeded the national norm in terms of involvement with their children.
- The group that received care for 18 months or longer exceeded or was similar to the national norm in terms of well-being, indicated by emotional support, positive mental health, and life satisfaction.
- Over 90 percent of students who spend at least 18 months at Boys Town graduate from high school, compared to rates of 25–50 percent among students who qualified for admission here but did not come.
- The school met Adequate Yearly Progress goals.
- The GBT National Data Base records positive growth in areas such as welfare, safety, and consumer (youth and family) satisfaction.
- Student grades, discipline, and attendance have improved.

day training in basic social skills that breaks down expectations behaviorally and teaches the students the requisite skills—such as accepting criticism, following instructions, greeting others, accepting compliments, having a conversation, asking for help, and listening. Students are not permitted to advance to the next level unless they show understanding of appropriate behavior.

“From the very nature of our mission,” Gehringer says, “our school is steeped in character education.” The GBT Education Model, rooted in the principles of applied behavioral analysis and social learning, is integrated into the entire school day.

Basically, it involves four main tenets: to monitor one's feelings, to control impulses, to empathize with others, and to delay gratification. Interviews with graduating seniors show how the model has helped them. Erin comments that she learned to make wiser choices: "Before Boys Town, I always hung around with a bad crowd. Boys Town has taught me to choose my friends wisely." Connor adds how he has gained empathy for those less fortunate, saying, "I have gained respect for all of the kids who are here. We all are getting better together."

Don Bader, religion department and community services chair, says, "Character education has always been implicit at Boys Town. Adding Character Counts eight years ago made it explicit. It dovetails with the Education Model." Each of the six pillars—respect, trustworthiness, fairness, responsibility, caring, and citizenship—is broken down into behavioral terms so students can understand concretely "what it looks like and what it sounds like." Athletic coach Kevin Kush adds, "Many of these kids just don't know the basic rules of life. We make it simple for them."

Learning to Improve Oneself and Help Others

All community members are trained and retrained in techniques for implementation of the Education Model in conjunction with Character Counts. This includes all stakeholders, all of whom have equal value: family-teachers, administration, faculty, plumbers, cafeteria workers, biological parents, and students. Additionally, all 76 high school staff members receive training in The Well-Managed Classroom, a program that provides a sound theoretical foundation for classroom management as well as techniques for addressing diverse student needs.

Along with the expected academic and elective courses, the high school offers many hands-on courses that often fuse vocational training with service. For example, the Girls and Boys Town Print Shop published the *Youth Information Book* for members of the community. Other courses, such as Living without Chemicals, Journey of Love 1, and Journey of Love 2, address the students' emotional needs and dependency issues. A junior class, Employability Skills, provides opportunities for students to develop life plans through aptitude and skill assessment, personal research, and individual counseling. Among the more

popular offerings, such as computer labs and ROTC training, is one in vocal music—which, in part, explains the excellence of the Boys Town Choir.

Giving service joyfully to others is also an integral part of the learning process. "A large component of our kids' emotional and social healing process is to serve others in need," says Bader, who organizes many service opportunities. The Girls and Boys Town motto, *He ain't heavy, Father...he's m' brother*, comes from the famed Two Brothers statue that depicts a boy carrying his younger brother on his back. Standing between the campus Catholic and Protestant chapels, the statue symbolizes the three-fold emphasis on inclusion of all, compassion for everyone, and support by one's peers. Special Olympics communications director Steve Neesman points out that the Boys Town girls and boys always make sure that the disabled students feel good about themselves: "For these four hours, our athletes feel normal. They don't stand out in a crowd. You don't know how much that means to our athletes and their parents."

Athletics and Self-Government: Pathways to Recovery

Kush firmly believes that "athletics give you a chance to be proud of what you're doing." He admits that "teaching these kids social skills and the rules of good sportsmanship isn't easy," but once his players have internalized the rules, they play by them consistently. For example, when the football team trounced West Point-Beemer in a crushing 45-0 victory, Kush hardly expected to hear from the opponents. Yet, shortly after the game, their coach e-mailed him, complimenting the Boys Town team for its good manners and impeccable deportment. "These things just don't happen in other schools," remarks the coach. Robinson points out that Boys Town has won the Nebraska state Basketball Sportsmanship Award for the last two years, and the students seem prouder of this than of winning the Nebraska state basketball championship last year.

Equally enthusiastic about the way athletics have been a pathway to recovery is Mary Anderson, the high school's assistant principal and athletic coach. "Most of these girls have not been athletes, and it's a new experience for them." One of the most poignant stories that Anderson tells is of Kari, a student who managed to make States in her first year of track participation and suddenly found herself in the limelight.



GBT students help rangers clear out invasive plant species at the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge.

“Coach, all my life I never thought I could do anything right. I lived in darkness,” says Kari. “Thank you for giving me fifteen minutes of light.”

The self-government tradition also serves as an important tool for developing character. Ask viewers to name an unforgettable scene in the *Boys Town* film, and an obvious choice is the turn-around of the incorrigible Whitey Marsh, who becomes the mayor of Boys Town. Jordan, the present mayor, says that, like Whitey, he too has changed since his arrival in his sophomore year. Having run away from home several times, he describes himself as “distrustful” and “coming to GBT with his guard up.” Once he began to let others in, he started to change, he listened to authority and peers, and his grades improved. As mayor, Jordan serves as the Student Ambassador, Student Council president, and the chief spokesperson for the students. But it is not just the mayor who has a leadership role. From the Citizenship Ceremony at which every new child is “sworn in” as a citizen, the students are aware they can contribute to “their” town. Many students also demonstrate leadership skills by serving on the Student Council, assuming duties in their homes, assisting in service projects, and participating in caucus discussions. Jacqueline, who arrived as “a stubborn fourteen-year-old who didn’t like help from anyone,” shares that her peers and her GBT family helped her to discover that she “can be a strong leader and accomplish much.”

Continuing to Flourish through Community Outreach

Father Flanagan’s mission, *to change the way America cares for her children and families*, flourishes today far beyond his dreams. Girls and Boys Town programs now extend to 19 sites in 15 states and the District of Columbia, each of which participates in the Outreach program and implements the Education Model. A training division exists, and staff travel nationally to provide workshops on a host of topics, from classroom management to developing parenting skills. Girls and Boys Town stands out as the most successful rehabilitation center for severely troubled youth in the nation; a sixteen-year longitudinal follow-up study indicates that significant numbers of GBT youth have positive outcomes in adulthood.

In an interview with faculty members to pinpoint the magic ingredient for that success, an interesting

phenomenon took place: one by one, the speakers unwittingly started to talk about the way that GBT had positively affected their own lives. Apparently, its transformational powers are contagious. Gehringer recalls an incident at his own high school reunion, where he met a man whose son had been successfully rehabilitated at GBT. The man thanked Gehringer, not only for saving his *boy* but also for teaching *him* how to be a better parent.

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PRINCIPAL’S BEST PICKS: Robert Gehringer

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *safe and supportive*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: our students sharing their stories with others, to show that there is hope for even the most severely troubled

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: success stories of “throwaway kids” who return to us and tell us about their changed lives

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: the fact that over 90 percent of students who spend at least 18 months at Boys Town graduate from high school, compared to rates of 25–50 percent among students who qualified for admission here but did not come; improved grades for kids who have never been successful in school

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Keep it simple, and model what you teach.*