

With The Atmosphere Of Farm Living Children Enjoy Good Life At Bonny Oaks School

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Nestled in its idyllic surroundings, the Bonny Oaks school looks more like a sleepy dairy farm than an institution for homeless children.

Such a wholesome setting as apparently well served in school, its many students and staff members throughout the years and the Chattanooga area for the better part of a century.

"The farm is the most therapeutic thing we have going for us," says Malcolm Adamson, superintendent of the Bonny Oaks School for almost 40 years. "It gives the children a sense of responsibility to be around the workings of a farm, though we're not trying to make them farmers."

Bonny Oaks was founded in 1895 for the care of many children of categories. It was chartered by the state in 1896 under an enabling act passed at the request of the Hamilton County delegation for counties to establish care facilities for abandoned children.

There are a variety of reasons why a child might come to live at Bonny Oaks, but most of the children are referred by the Juvenile Court or the Department of Human Services. In many instances, the school is a means of "last resort," accepting children unable to be placed in a foster home, or licensed agency. Any authorized organization in the community may commit neglected children to the school.

"We're not a jail, but a congenial family," insists Mr. Adamson. "It's a good life here, even though the kids would rather be in a home. God meant for these children to be in homes. We naturally strive for a time when they can get back to their families or relatives or some family situation. In the meantime, this institution helps unfortunate children to make a life for themselves."

Mr. Adamson has been described as "the man with the biggest family in town." One can plainly see by observing

the bright, vibrant faces of some of the 110 children who call Bonny Oaks home that Mr. Adamson is raising his family well.

The mutual love and respect that exists between Mr. Adamson and his children is greatly evident. It is rare that a child should pass by Mr. Adamson without having his or her hair tussled or getting a big hug.

Says Mr. Adamson, "I don't want to sound polyanish or anything, but what I'm doing with my life right now is what I've always wanted to do."

The morning dew was still glistening on the grass as Mr. Adamson led the way to the dairy and storage barns. As he spoke, his pride and enthusiasm for the work at Bonny Oaks was obvious.

"My basic emphasis here is not the farm, but it is a vital, necessary tool for teaching the kids what they might never have learned otherwise. The bucolic atmosphere is beneficial. It teaches them about life."

Mr. Adamson flashed an amused smile as he remembered one little boy's first experience at seeing a calf born.

"He was a little city slicker and he was really agog. It was a good experience for him."

The scene behind the barns was picturesque as cows grazed lazily and tractors mowed the sloping pastures in the bright morning sun. A long row of corn and a thicket of trees at the edge of the pasture obstructed a full view of the school's 323 acres.

Located on the school's acreage, in addition to the barns, are a chapel, dormitories, apartments for the staff, a clinic, a gym, two swimming pools, a supply room, a kitchen, several dining halls and a fish pond which Mr. Adamson says proudly is stocked with "channel cat and bluegill."

The house in which the Adamsons live is the Keese House. It is a stately, white antebellum structure which was built in 1854 by Lewis Shepherd.

George Campbell, president of Campbell and Associates Engineering Consultants and current director of the Bonny Oaks School, is another individual committed to the well-being of the Bonny Oaks family. He met us on the road from the barns, and good-naturedly directed us under a shade tree where we could escape the heat.

Mr. Campbell came to be associated with the school through his involvement with the Chattanooga Civitan and Rotary Clubs. He became the school's director following the death of former Bonny Oaks director and dedicated supporter, Creed F. Bates.

Mr. Campbell took the time to pay Mr. Adamson a compliment.

"He's the reason that this institution is such an excellent one," he said. "Because of him, there is an atmosphere of honest, solid living here, with the end of turning out good, solid citizens."

"The opportunities are here for a person to realize his full potential," Mr. Campbell continued. "I'm proud of this. One fellow lived and worked here almost all of his life. He was handicapped and unfortunate, but through a scholarship from Bonny Oaks he was able to attend college and is now a practicing lawyer."

Others have left Bonny Oaks to attend college and vocational schools. One former Bonny Oaks student recently graduated from UTC, and another just received his master's degree from UTK in Business Administration.

Mr. Adamson, a former Methodist minister and a graduate of Duke University, has seen approximately 450 students leave Bonny Oaks in pursuit of their futures. He has performed the weddings of many of his former students in the school's Bachman Chapel. Leaving the nest has occasionally been a problem for some, according to Mr. Adamson.

"It was a long time before we ever got started with them going off to college. They wanted independence; but they had been dependent on us for so long that it had mis-

placed their values. We try to let them do everything in the world they can do for themselves."

One way in which Mr. Adamson has attempted to instill self-sufficiency in his students is through the school's Student Work Program. "It's a bit like taking money from one pocket and putting it into another," states Mr. Adamson.

All of the boys and girls aged 14 and above at Bonny Oaks must participate in the program. Most of the students, according to Mr. Adamson are "exceptional workers."

Students are responsible for getting their own money for movies, lab and locker fees at school, school lunches and clothing. Says Mr. Adamson, "Although they could take free lunches at school, we let them take their money like another kid. This is partially done to break down this confounded welfare recidivism."

While many students at Bonny Oaks "pay their own way," the costs involved in the pursuit of college and vocational training could not be met without the generosity of concerned citizens.

The Civitan Club has been a major supporter of the school for many years. But a large amount of financial assistance comes from individual members of the club and private citizens. Several people have willed sizable sums of money to the school.

While Bonny Oaks cannot solicit because it doesn't pay taxes, the school can accept contributions. These contributions make up at least one-third of the school's standard of living. Grants from Hamilton County pay for the remainder of the school's costs.

"Concerned citizens have kept us in business," Mr. Campbell noted. "The three buses here have been donated by the Civitans, and Charlie Coleman, a member of the Civitans, was responsible for building one of our swimming pools."

"Mr. Cartter Patten and W.C. Hudlow have both been real pillars in the past. Mr. Patten gave us some of our