

Local Headlines:

Anchor academy is in a growth mode

By Patrick Winderl

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The dozens of young men residing at the Anchor Academy did not choose to live there.

They were sent there.

Sent by the courts, sent by their parents, sent by forces outside their control. They were sent, 53 of them, to live with people they had never met at a facility they had never seen, located on 96 acres of the most remote landscape imaginable.

They came, angry and unwilling, to a former Air Force base 32 miles north of Havre.

In many cases the boys have come because they have nowhere else to go. Estranged from their families, kicked out of school, facing jail time, whatever the reason, they have all been sent to the academy for one reason - to change their lives.

"Presently there are 6 million teens in the United States living on the streets," said Dennis McElwrath, superintendent of the academy. "They have nowhere to go and nothing to eat. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in teenagers today. The problem is that kids feel so poorly about themselves, and they reflect that through their behavior."

So how does the academy change this behavior?

"We have two goals," McElwrath said. "The first is to teach the boys hands-on skills, and the second is to give them a sense of accomplishment. We want to teach them real-life skills that could help them enter the work force later in life, and help them build character and work ethic."

The Anchor Academy moved to its present location four years ago. Home to 53 boys today, the academy is undergoing extensive construction and is growing rapidly.

"We want to accommodate younger children, and we have discussed the possibility of becoming a co-ed facility," McElwrath said. "It is certainly one of our goals."

The academy sits atop a hill 8 miles off of Montana Highway 232. "The Anchor," as it is called, is a sprawling complex of ex-military buildings that is now home to a self-contained center for troubled boys. In addition to the 53 young men, 16 full-time staff members live at the academy.

The facility relies on loyalty and trust, McElwrath said.

"Out here there are no locks on the doors, no watch towers, no guards with guns," he said. "This is not a detention center. We teach social responsibility through leadership."



One of two wind turbines built by Anchor Academy students stands tall on the grounds of the old air base north of Havre. The Anchor Academy purchased the land about four years ago.

The academy runs on a tight schedule. During a typical day, students wake up at 6 a.m. They shower, then eat breakfast with the staff and hold an early prayer service. School begins at 8:30 a.m., with a lunch break at 12:30 p.m. The boys return to the classroom until 3 p.m., when work crew begins.

There are nine work crews that consist of six students. Each crew is assigned a specific task under the leadership of one of the senior students.

"We teach management skills and teamwork," McElwrath said. "There's a difference in doing work for work's sake and doing work to teach a sense of accomplishment. It is amazing to see the change in the boys' attitudes as they take some pride in the things they have done."

Work crew ends at 5:30 p.m. and everyone gathers in the mess hall for dinner. Students are given free time until a short chapel service at 7:30 p.m., followed by choir practice. At 9 the boys divide into their work crews and hold short prayer groups. Then students read or do homework assignments until lights out at 10 p.m.

The academy's choir last summer performed at churches in 22 states.

Dominating the landscape at the facility is a massive gray, six-story structure, the former radio tower. It is vacant, although the academy plans to turn it into a dormitory with room to house more than 100 students.

"Our goal is to make the transition within three years," McElwrath said.

Behind the tower is another gray building that will one day hold a swimming pool.

"Right now we take the boys to the Havre Community Pool once a month," McElwrath said. "Building our own pool is just one of the projects we have planned."

Just south of the tower is the former operations building, which will be converted into a recreation center and weight room, McElwrath said.

Directly west of the future recreation center is a housing facility built into a hillside. Once occupied by officers, the building is vacant. McElwrath said the building will eventually be used to house students.

"We would like to expand the Anchor to accommodate younger boys. We get a lot of calls from parents of 10- and 12-year-old kids. This will be our housing for younger boys," McElwrath said.

On the northwest corner of the property is the auto shop, where students are taught automotive classes.

"We have members of the community come and teach automotive classes," McElwrath said. "Cal Couch teaches a mechanics class. Occasionally people will donate vehicles for us to work on. Right now we are working on a school bus and an old pickup."

The academy has three buses. There is a charter bus and two Crown Coach school buses. The Crowns weigh a massive 28,000 pounds each. Built on an 18-wheeler chassis, the bus has a capacity rating of 90 and is powered by Cummins turbo diesel motors.

The main living area at the academy is a multipurpose building. All 53 residents sleep in a large barracks-style room. In the room is a staff center where medications and personal hygiene supplies are held. A glass fish tank is home to two lizards that have been given various names over the years. Students did all of the renovation to the room, McElwrath said.

The building also hosts the dining hall and the current rec room. The rec room has a racquetball court, weightlifting equipment, and pool, foosball and pingpong tables. The building also houses

locker rooms and a laundry facility. Students do their own laundry in three-man crews.

One of the recent projects the boys helped to complete is the installation of two wind turbines on the property. The construction is complete although they are not yet operating. The turbines are expected to generate 70 percent of the energy needs for the academy.

"The construction lasted from April until August," McElwrath said. "It was not a small project. Each of the foundations is 8 feet deep, has 70 yards of concrete and 7,000 pounds of rebar. The turbines will offset our energy costs when we get them running. It was also a unique opportunity to teach the boys about renewable energy."

Directly adjacent to one of the towers is another project students at the academy helped to build - a water slide. The slide uses the natural decline of a 100-foot hill to launch innertubes down its slope.

At the base of the hill is a basketball court, which sees more action in warmer weather.

On the east side of the complex are four houses that are home to staff members and their families. The academy plans to build 13 more houses at a rate of two a year. Near the location is a massive silver propane tank, which students helped to install.

"The boys have placed more than 6,000 feet of utility lines," McElwrath said.

The school is the northernmost building at the academy. The school has four full-time teachers and tutors who assist the boys in their academics. The school uses the Accelerated Christian Education program, or ACE, and issues high school diplomas every year to students who earn them.

Unlike many high school classrooms, the one at the academy is nearly silent. The students work quietly in small partitions as staff members float throughout the room providing help and answering questions.

"There is absolutely no way to fall through the cracks with ACE," McElwrath said. "The program allows students to work at their own pace, and gives teachers the ability to tutor students individually and get kids that are behind up to speed."

The school uses a nine-month academic year with a one-month summer school session. McElwrath said he expects eight students to graduate in June.

The school is undergoing new additions, including building a computer room and a library. Again, the students are involved in the construction.

"We had an electrician come in and show the boys how to install panels and conduit. They have done more than 3,000 feet of wire," McElwrath said.

Weekends at the academy are more relaxed. Students are allowed to sleep in, and then often have activities planned. They might watch movies or go out to dinner in Havre, or go swimming. Recently they went on a skiing trip at Hidden Valley in Alberta.

Other trips have included attending the Great Northern Fair and the demolition derby. Often the boys at the academy do volunteer work for people in the community. In the spring the students will help area ranchers brand cattle.

"The boys are really involved in the community. We want to give them the desire to help others," McElwrath said.

Three times a week the academy holds Baptist church services.

Parents of boys living at the academy visit every four months. They can take their sons on weekend

trips, or can stay on the facility. The academy has apartments that are available to families free of charge when they visit.

The Anchor Academy receives no government funding. Instead it relies completely on donations and tuition.

Parents are asked to pay \$700 a month, but "students are not turned away for financial reasons," McElwrath said.

"We have some kids whose parents pay \$700 per month, and some boys who are basically here for free," he said. "We have to rely on donations or we could not exist."

One of the best things about the academy is staffers are not motivated by money, McElwrath said.

"They are not volunteers, but they are close to it," he said. "Four hundred dollars a month is not a lot of money. The staff are here because they genuinely care about the boys."

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