



Wes Johnson & Rawhide Ranch

BY TERESSA MAHL

Wes Johnson (MA '95) is passionate about helping hurting people change their lives. He always knew he wanted to help people, and as the Holy Spirit put ministries of mercy and compassion on his heart, Wes found himself drawn towards the field of counseling. After obtaining a counseling degree from Trinity and gaining fourteen years of experience in a variety of counseling positions, today Wes finds himself at Rawhide Boys Ranch. At Rawhide, Wes is able to see his passion for counseling and spiritual healing come together in a dynamic way.





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Rawhide Boys Ranch is a Christ-centered residential care facility in New London, Wisconsin, dedicated to helping troubled teen boys change their lives. Founded in 1965 by John and Jan Gillespie, along with Green Bay Packer’s Hall-of-Fame quarterback Bart Starr and his wife Cherry, the Ranch served to provide an alternative for boys who were facing delinquency sanctions or most often prison time. Since then, the Ranch has grown from one home with a couple of kids to a full-service residential treatment center with seven homes and one hundred and twenty full time employees, with the capacity to serve sixty boys at a time.

In response to an increasing demand for services, last year Rawhide opened their first outpatient clinic, Rawhide Youth and Family Services in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and hired Wes as their outpatient therapist. This new prevention-based program allows Rawhide to extend its reach into the community and provide counseling for previously underserved families and youth. As one of only three counseling clinics in Northeast Wisconsin accepting Medicaid, Rawhide sees this program as an opportunity to minister to those in need. While the outpatient facility has only been open for a little over a year, it has grown quickly and provides counseling services to over eighty clients per month.

Although the outpatient center is located roughly an hour away from the Ranch, patients are still able to benefit from some of the unique services provided at the Ranch, such as equine-assisted therapy. Located on the Ranch is a fully functioning stable with twelve horses and an indoor riding arena.

An equine-assisted therapy program allows patients the opportunity to leave the confines of a structured office visit and spend time with the horses at the Ranch. Wes explains that people who might otherwise be resistant to counseling are often open to equine-assisted therapy. Especially for teens who have been in and out of counseling offices their


entire lives, this approach proves invaluable. Being in the ring with a horse feels very different than a traditional counseling session and as a result can be less threatening for some.

“Horses are very intuitive and sensitive animals,” Wes explains. For example, a horse may react similarly to how humans might respond to a person’s anger. Focusing on the horse’s response allows for an opportunity to address a person’s behavior in the context of his or her relationship with the animal. In doing so, patients are often less defensive and can see their actions more objectively. Then, Wes helps patients draw parallels between the animal’s behavior and the response of others around them.

Interestingly, many of the horses in the program have a history of abuse or neglect. Most of them are more than twenty-five years old and their usefulness to a farm or stable has run its course. Rawhide takes them in and, as with the kids they help, gives them a second chance. Often the kids who have suffered abuse tend to gravitate towards horses with similar histories and connect well with those horses that they see to be “like me.”

Not only does the equine program aid in the therapeutic side of counseling, but horsemanship training also plays an important role in one of the primary treatment strategies at Rawhide Ranch—the development of competencies. “Adolescent boys and girls really need to develop competencies,” Wes explains. “If they don’t develop competencies, they tend to fall through the cracks and become really good at being bad. They can really become skilled at it, and that becomes their identity.” Rawhide provides an alternative to these negative identity structures by giving youth an opportunity to develop skills and competencies around which to build identities. In addition to horsemanship, Rawhide’s competency programs include a





high ropes course, a rock climbing wall, a woodshop, a fully licensed school, and an automotive program.

Rawhide's well-known automotive program draws thousands of donated vehicles a year and affords the boys training in auto detailing. After the cars are evaluated and detailed, they are sold in auctions, with the proceeds going to help support Rawhide.

However, life at Rawhide is about more than just developing competencies. It's about changing hearts. In a program called Building Spiritual Muscle, young men at the Ranch are paired with mentors who lead them through a discipleship program and often become instrumental in leading these teens to Christ. Wes insists that heart change is crucial. "On our own, we can patch together some behavioral strategy that will address a very specific issue for a short period of time, but without Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit changing hearts, we aren't able to produce the lifelong change that it's going to take."

This focus on heart change is evident in outpatient services as well. "We are constantly directing families and clients to get connected with their church, to get connected with a spiritual mentor, to find a way to express their faith in Christ and live that out," Wes points out. "It's apparent in everything that we do."

It was precisely this integration of theology and counseling that drew Wes to Rawhide to begin with. After fourteen years of counseling, he was no longer interested in simply implementing strategies for short-term behavioral change; he wanted to see lives transformed. Wes was first introduced to the concept of integration when he and his wife, Kimberly (MA '96), were students at TEDS. "I had no idea integration was even a concept before coming to Trinity. Once we started to learn about the integration of psychology and theology, I knew in my spirit these were the kind of counselors that needed to be out there in the community."

Wes has experience in many types of counseling environments: from working in juvenile justice in West Palm Beach, Florida, to a counseling center at a university, to a community mental health clinic. While he had the freedom to be a Christian counselor, his beliefs were often

viewed as part of a mosaic of varying religious perspectives that are equally viable. The element that sets Rawhide apart from his other counseling experiences is this integration of faith and counseling. "At Rawhide, there is a community of like-minded believers with a passion for working to provide compassion and healing for families and kids. It is a powerful thing."

The staff at Rawhide is intentional about their Christ-centered mission and about truly caring for the needs of the people they serve. The mission statement at Rawhide begins

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with the words, "Being dependent on God." These are more than just words for the Rawhide staff. Every Wednesday morning, the staff assembles for worship, prayer, and devotion. "The culture of prayer related to every detail of the organization is impressive," Wes comments. At Christmas time, the staff members donated money to provide gift cards for the many impoverished families Wes works with at the outpatient clinic. In the near future, Rawhide plans to coordinate a joint venture with other area ministries to connect needy families with churches. By providing needed food and supplies, they will communicate a clear message: we care about you, and Christ cares about you.

Given Rawhide's commitment to a Christ-centered philosophy and ministry, as well as excellent counseling services, it is no surprise to find a number of TEDS alumni employed at Rawhide—Wes is one of seven. He was recruited to Rawhide by Mark Tegtmeier (MA '89), now his clinical supervisor, and he later discovered he had classes at Trinity with Rawhide's current youth services director, Danny Stone (MA '95). Wes, in taking note of the number of Trinity alumni at Rawhide, says, "I believe God brings like-minded people together to accomplish his will—to show love and compassion to the hurting. Trinity has always been well represented here at Rawhide."



Rawhide's outcomes speak for themselves. Statistically speaking, success is measured by the percentage of individuals who do not re-offend. An average success rate for a program like this is around forty percent. At Rawhide eighty percent of the students who complete a program do not re-offend; their lives have been untangled from the snares of drugs, gangs, and violence. Without the choking weeds of a life of delinquency and crime, the gospel is given fertile soil in which to take root.

For Wes, the success is in the life change. "What brings me the greatest joy and satisfaction is to see when a kid, or family, or parent finally gets it. It's not about their selfish wants and desires. Instead, they see that there is a relationship with Christ out there that is waiting for them, and that He has been there all along and really can change their lives and bring them out of the darkness and the pit they were in. To be any part in that process—whether I am the key figure that leads them to Christ or one of a hundred voices in their lifetime—there is just such a rewarding feeling of knowing eternity has been changed for people because of the work that we are doing." ▲



For more information about Rawhide Boys Ranch, visit www.rawhide.org/strongfamily, or email Wes at wjohnson@rawhide.org.

The "Fundamentalist" Label *continued from page 9*

TM: Has anyone challenged the assumptions of Fundamentalisms Comprehended?

JW: It needs to be acknowledged up front that there is much helpful analysis in this large project. At the same time, the reputable sociologist Peter Berger had serious reservations regarding its import. He indicated that it could be a "book weapon—the kind that could do serious injury."

Moreover, a French sociologist pointed out that one can badly misunderstand various radical religious groups if one uses American fundamentalism as a foil for understanding them. Each religious movement needs to be understood in its own terms before one attempts to engage in the study of comparative religion. A one-size-fits-all approach [i.e. imposing external criteria upon the intricacies and particularities of world religions] can lead to significant misunderstandings of religious faiths.

TM: There is a challenge in all this for us as evangelical Christians as well.

JW: Yes. We can get into difficulty if we use the word "fundamentalist" as a slur. This apparently took place in the CNN presentations when President Carter, a notable Christian, criticized the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention by calling the leadership "fundamentalist." This was a hurtful use of the expression because a few moments

earlier President Carter had employed the same expression in referring to the Ayatollah Khomeini.

As evangelical Christians we need to be very generous and careful in how we use words. We might want to place a moratorium on the use of the word "fundamentalist" for groups that do not self-identify with the expression. To avoid unfair comparisons with American fundamentalists, we might refrain from applying the word "fundamentalist" to violent Muslims, Buddhists, and others.

Moreover, we might want to avoid using the word "fundamentalist" as a slur for conservative Christians whose lifestyles or theological views we do not ourselves embrace. Many self-identified fundamentalists are in fact quite wonderful Christians. Our use of slurs to describe them can actually reveal a prideful attitude on our part. It may indicate that we haughtily look down on these other Christians and do not respect them. This can create alienation between us and these other Christians which then, in turn, can make it difficult for non-Christians to know that we are Christ's disciples. Didn't Jesus teach that people will know that we are his disciples by the love we demonstrate to each other? As evangelical Christians, we do not have the luxury of using slurs in referring to Christians and non-Christians alike. We do have the joy and responsibility of treating them with respect and Christian love. ▲