

# Thriving

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## Reclaiming "Unsalvageable" Kids

*William Perry & Larry K. Brendtro*



This story began at Starr Commonwealth, a residential school for troubled youth in Michigan. Larry Brendtro was successor to school's founder Floyd Starr who was first to express the well-known motto, "There is no such thing as a bad boy." It was there that Brendtro would meet Bill Perry—co-author of this article. Bill was trying his best to be the worst kid possible. Flash forward several decades to the present when an e-mail from Bill Perry arrived at the speaker's bureau website on which Brendtro was listed:

*I don't know if Dr. Brendtro will remember me. I was an incorrigible, unsalvageable, 15-year-old juvenile delinquent from Canada sent to Starr Commonwealth in 1968. I stayed for 21 months.*

*I got into a remarkable amount of criminal activity while on the run from Starr. In spite of my crimes, all I got was forgiveness, especially from Dr. Brendtro. Forgiveness, not punishment, rehabilitated me. I broke the cycle of generational recidivism in my family, went on to university and a career of remarkable achievements, and some disappointment, like a normal person. I am proud of my two children who are also graduates and gainfully employed.*

*Please thank Dr. Brendtro for me. I especially remember him talking to me when I received a concussion from a staff person I hit and insulted. The good Dr. visited me while I was recovering in the infirmary, and his pep talk was unforgettable. He assured me that I would grow into a normal sized man, (I was less than 5 ft. tall), my voice would drop, (I still talked like a girl) and that I had potential. It would all come true. How did he know?*

This article recounts Bill's journey and highlights essential strategies for helping young people transform trauma into resilience.

A wealth of research shows that the behavior of supposedly "incorrigible, unsalvageable" youngsters usually springs from relational trauma. Yet deviance-driven researchers like Robert Hare mislabel our most challenging youth as "budding psychopaths."<sup>1</sup> Hare's criminogenic views corrupted DSM-5 as psychiatrists concocted a new mental disorder for "callous and unemotional" children.<sup>2</sup> There is clear evidence that callous parents are the main cause of "callous" behavior in their offspring. Further, children who are nurtured naturally develop compassion and prosocial behavior.<sup>3</sup> This was true of young Bill Perry, but we knew very little about what might be behind his behavior.

After receiving Bill's email, Larry replied that it was great to reconnect, shared information about his own current activities, and made the following comments:

*Well, of course I remember you and the challenges you faced during your stay at Starr. I was most impressed with the specific memories you had as you struggled to find your identity and purpose in life. What you wrote would be good to share with the new generation of youth workers and educators, if that is okay with you. Too many adults today invoke zero tolerance and give up on feisty youth.*

Bill responded that he was eager to share his story about events that brought him to Starr, his struggle to turn his life around, and his life course across the ensuing years.

*I now realize that the Ontario Children's Aid Society (CAS) and Starr took very good care of me in spite of my problems with authority. You might be interested to know that the CAS did not have much knowledge of what happened to me before I was 10 years old. Both of my parents were hardcore criminals. My father was an opportunist, and his specialties were armed robbery and safe-cracking. A security guard caught him opening a safe late one night, and my father shot but didn't kill him. He was convicted of attempted murder.*

*My mother was the infamous one. She may be one of the top five female criminals in Canadian history. She started in what I call the female rough trades. Her sister, my aunt, told me a few years ago that she was the most expensive prostitute in Toronto. That can cause a lot of ambivalence in a son. I didn't know whether to say "You go, Mom!" or "Oh, yuck."*

*My mother moved into the male rough trades including armed robbery and especially banks. She was the leader of the "Cleaver Gang." It was a name the papers gave them because one of the gang brandished a meat cleaver during bank robberies. I can send you newspaper clippings if you like. My mother was also charged with attempted murder, but the pimp she stabbed refused to testify against her, and the charges were dropped.*

*Authorities didn't know much about my life since I grew up hidden from the CAS in booze cans and brothels. Years later, after leaving Starr, I successfully applied to access my school records and discovered that I had attended 24 primary schools using six different names. My counselor,*

*David Dill, had a theory about me. After many counselling sessions, he pointed out that I seemed to have amnesia about anything that happened to me between the age of 8 and 10. The fact is, I was too ashamed to talk about those two years.*

*When I was 8, my mother abandoned me in a rooming house in downtown Toronto so that she could start a new life. The landlord brokered a new home for me with an elderly Seventh Day Adventist couple. I was sold to them. I stayed for six months until they told me they were too old and were passing me on to a younger couple in the church named McLean. The McLeans were wonderful people, and I would have been happy to be Billy McLean forever, but that was not my fate. I had heard my mother was in a car accident and in the hospital. I figured she must have died. How else could I explain her absence? After about six months, I was snatched off the street in front of McLean's house by the authorities who advised me my mother was alive and well in Windsor and I was on my way home. At first, she refused to accept me until the court threatened to charge her with child abandonment. About a year after we were reunited, she married, but nine days later she was killed in a car accident. What came next was perhaps the worst time of my life; the man she had married was "the stepfather from hell" who abused me physically and emotionally. The physical abuse bordered on sexual because I always had to be naked when he beat me. I was desperate to get away from him. I reported him to the CAS and the police but wasn't taken seriously. I was too embarrassed to show them the bruises and cuts on my body.*

If measured by the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale, Bill would max out his ACEs score.<sup>4</sup> Further, reared by criminal models, he seemed to be well on the way to a life of antisocial behavior. Yet beneath the pain, he was hungering for a stable relationship—to be a Billy named after parents who claimed him. Nevertheless, family unification dogma prevailed, and he was plucked from a loving home and returned to a rejecting mother.

Resilience science shows that humans have brain-based drives for wellness and keep searching for a path to a better life.<sup>5</sup> In a little-known classic on

the treatment of the problem child, Carl Rogers outlines key factors that affect the course of development but notes that *insight* ultimately can lead to positive outcomes. Insight entails understanding forces that influence behavior and taking responsibility for one's destiny.<sup>6</sup> As Albert Bandura notes, chance encounters impact the course of our lives.<sup>7</sup> Such a random event occurred when Bill watched the movie about Father Flanagan's Boys Town.

*One day, when I was 12 years old, something happened that gave me hope. This incident would have an indirect connection to Floyd Starr three years before I arrived at Starr. I was at home watching Boys Town, and I'm sure you see the connection already. There is a scene where some boys are being punished by being forced to do the duck walk. Just as the scene appeared, the step-father-from-hell entered the room, watched the scene, and said to me, "If*

*you don't start behaving, you are going to end up in a place like that." That was a eureka moment. I didn't see it as a threat so much as a promise. He may as well have said, "If you get in trouble, you don't have to live with me." As a result, I was determined to get in as much trouble as possible. I entered a morally ambiguous phase of my childhood, my start to being a child prodigy of juvenile delinquency. I thought long and hard about what sort of crimes I could commit. I was too small to turn to violence and didn't want to do anything that could lead to injury or death, like arson. But stealing cars, breaking and entering businesses, and stealing money from school locker rooms and church change rooms was okay by me. I started my crime spree by stealing my stepfather's new hot rod to run away from home. I got about 140 miles before I wrecked the car while the police were chasing me. I thought that should be enough to get me sent away, but it wasn't.*

Denis Stott studied 100 chronic delinquents in England and found a common theme of acting up to get removed from rejecting parents.<sup>8</sup> Such youth have been threatened with abandonment and decide to take charge and make it happen. They intentionally go to the devil to return the rejection and provoke a response.

*I spent two years breaking the law, trying to force the authorities to remove me from the stepfather. I also specialized in cons, collecting money door to door for “charities.” I was very effective because I was cross-eyed at the time which people must have thought was touching. Finally, at age 14, the CAS seized me, and I became a crown ward.*

*I figured I was headed to Bowmanville or St. John’s Reformatory for Boys, two facilities famous for their abuse of boys. Lucky for me, I had a social worker who was determined to save me from that fate and to send me to an institution with some academic credentials. Mrs. Samosi was the one who orchestrated my placement at Starr. You know the story from there. Imagine my surprise when I found out there was a connection between Starr and the movie “Boys Town Nebraska” which popularized the motto developed several years earlier by Floyd Starr: “There is no such thing as a bad boy.”*

Just because he escaped an abusive home did not stop delinquent behavior which has its own payoff of power and excitement. And, with other peers to impress, Bill continued his escapades. He recalls many encounters with Starr’s leaders, Larry Brendtro and Arlin Ness, who regularly would deal with Bill when he exhausted the patience of his direct care staff.



A young William Perry with his mother.

Ness remembers Bill as a small statured kid who in the beginning was putting up a very tough front, but this coping strategy was no longer necessary when he began to trust adults and believe in his potential.

Bill was a kid in pain, and he showed it by lashing out at those in authority. As our colleague Jim Anglin describes, pain-based behavior is often met by punishment which by definition is applying more pain.<sup>9</sup> But Bill discovered that instead of punishment, defiant behavior was handled by Life Space Interview strategies, helping him gain insight into how his behavior affects self and others.<sup>10</sup> When crisis situations are used to reflect on what one wants from life, the conditions for change are set.

*Starr was my 28th school, and I think a big part of my turnaround was being able to stay in one place for almost two years. I wanted to believe that Starr was corrupt and abusive because that’s what I thought of authority figures. But, I was not being mistreated, quite the contrary. The turning point was the 21 days I spent in solitary confinement at a prison after my crime spree while on the run from Starr. An incorrigible, unsalvageable juvenile delinquent entered that cell, and three weeks later, when I learned that I was forgiven and returning to Starr, a normal boy with academic aspirations came out.*

*I figured I could still enjoy life without breaking laws, although that had been thrilling. That is why I like to say forgiveness, not punishment, rehabilitated me. The positive side of my personality blossomed at Starr. Although a former car thief, I even got to work as a chauffeur for elderly Floyd Starr who lived on the campus in his retirement—a testament to his belief that, “There’s no such thing as a bad boy.”*

Young people who fight adults wear down their caregivers and teachers who tend to get battle fatigue and revert to punitive interactions. The power of positive relational support in time of crisis is seen in Bill’s first email describing the time he was placed in the infirmary for a concussion from a staff member who fought back at his attack. Instead of punishment, he received support and encouragement. This was not permissiveness but high expectations: rather than demanding obedience, staff were demanding greatness.

In the years since Bill was at Starr, there has been an abundance of research on positive youth development that highlights the essentials for



turning around troubled lives. The Circle of Courage model identifies four universal values which lead to resilient outcomes.<sup>11</sup> All are seen in Bill's story:

**Belonging:** Bill was able to develop close bonds with staff, in particular those who communicated with him in times of trouble. As Fritz Redl observed, "children must get plenty of love and affection whether they deserve it or not."<sup>12</sup>

**Mastery:** In spite of his chaotic school history, Bill was always motivated to learn. For years, he used his cleverness to outwit adults. When he became invested in education, his creative and academic potential flourished.

**Independence:** After using his power to fight untrusted adults who in futility tried to control him, Bill gained the ability to develop responsibility and a sense of self-efficacy, committed to controlling his destiny.

**Generosity:** It is highly significant that Bill considers forgiveness to be the key reason for transforming his life. Generosity is giving, and forgiveness is the ultimate act of giving, showing good will to those who have done wrong.

These Circle of Courage values are linked to universal biosocial needs that motivate human behavior. But we also have primitive pain/pleasure brain programs which give rise to needs for **Safety** and **Adventure**.<sup>13</sup> Bill found both physical and emotional safety at Starr and put aside the adventure of delinquent thrills to construct a life rich with creativity.

*What happened after I left Starr and returned to Canada is a story of self-achievement and happiness. My return got off to a rough start because I was put back two grades. I did grades 10 and 11 again, skipped grade 12, finished grade 13 as an Ontario Scholar and was accepted at 6 universities. I attended York in Toronto and graduated with many distinctions. After graduating I became an artist. Photography was my first passion. Just last week, I spoke at an international conference about an historic photo I took in 1974. After a couple years of photography, I discovered computers and became one of Canada's foremost interactive media artists. I founded an art organization that is still around today. I married and had two beautiful children. I eventually created a publishing company which produced several remarkable books including Be Nice In 60 Languages. It was a bestseller in Toronto.*

Perhaps the most significant impact from Bill's book was the pride it brought to his son who penned this enthusiastic review on amazon.com:

*Be Nice In 60 Languages was written by someone I know: my Dad. Like him, I think his book is really cool. I'm in grade 10 in Toronto, the world's most multilingual city. Here, most people don't speak English at home. I took the book to school for show and tell. My friends loved it. They all wanted copies. I've made lots of new friends, people I didn't know started asking for copies. Suddenly I was cool at school.... I would recommend this book to any student going to school with foreign speaking students. And, it is a great gift. Canada's national newspaper The National Post calls it "the perfect stocking stuffer.... I think my Dad should get the Nobel Peace Prize.*

Of course, life has its lows as well as its highs. Resilience does not always remove the scars of early trauma, and we see echoes of the past as Bill struggled to parent his own children. Yet, he describes his life as one of "remarkable achievement and some disappointments, like a normal person."

*Everything has not been rainbows and sunshine. Nobody told me that survivors of serious childhood trauma can be undone by their own children. I relived my childhood through the eyes and ages of my children. It was a double whammy. First, I imagined what happened to me happening to them, and I was terrified they might be at risk. Second, I realized what happened to me was extreme abuse. Previously, it was something I tried to put out of mind. Realizing that you've been a victim of abuse is debilitating, and I had an emotional breakdown. It seems I did everything to destroy myself except suicide, because I couldn't saddle my children with that legacy. I was terrified that their proximity to me was dangerous for my children and insisted on a divorce. I maintained joint custody, and they spent half their time with me; that seemed safe enough. Otherwise, I was a shell of my former self. I lost all ambition and my business. I threw away my ID, lived for years without a bank account, and drank too much. This went on for about 15 years until I slowly started to regain my previous personality.*

*For the first time since being at Starr, I sought professional help. I underwent a psychiatric assessment, and the doctor's diagnosis said, "Chronic and Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD), triggered by the birth of*

his children, is in remission since they became adults." I'm much better today, life is wonderful, but it was a very dark time for those years.

Well, this email is a lot longer than I expected. I know you must be busy, I hope it is not too long. You were always easy to talk to, or in this case, type to. Thanks again. If there is one lesson my bad boy days has taught me, it is my comment that "forgiveness, not punishment, rehabilitates children." Mind you, it helps if you have professionals in your life who nurture you.

Bill Perry is attesting to the truism that programs don't change people—people do.<sup>14</sup> As philosopher and physician Albert Schweitzer contended, even if others are pessimistic about the prognoses of difficult cases, our willing and hoping can be optimistic.<sup>15</sup> Bill found people who believed in him, and he came to believe in himself. He did not just make superficial tweaks to troubled behavior but experienced a full transformation. As described by our colleague Scott Larson, transformation is "becoming something new that has never before existed."<sup>16</sup>

**William Perry** is a former student at Starr Commonwealth who returned to Canada and went on to study at York University in Toronto. After graduating, he founded numerous art organizations and projects including this early example of his creativity: "The Woman in the Window," an historic 360 degree photo taken in 1974 while he was still a ward of the court: <https://roundme.com/tour/39207/view/95464/> He may be contacted at [wm.perry@me.com](mailto:wm.perry@me.com)

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## (Endnotes)

- 1 Hare, 1999.
- 2 APA, 2013.
- 3 Rhee et al., 2013.
- 4 <http://acestudy.org/the-ace-score.html>
- 5 Masten, 2014.
- 6 Rogers, 1939.
- 7 Bandura, 1982.
- 8 Stott, 1980.
- 9 Anglin, 2015.
- 10 Brendtro & Ness, 1983.
- 11 Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern (2002).
- 12 Redl & Wineman, 1957, p. 303.
- 13 Strother, Maikoetter, Freado, & Brendtro, 2016.
- 14 Milliken, 2007.
- 15 Schweitzer, 1955.
- 16 Larson & Ponds, 2015, p. 156.