

Richard and Marilyn Thomas

On

Family Teachers

At Dot Lake

By

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TN: I'm interviewing Richard and Marilyn Thomas, and first of all I'd just like to find out what interested you to even check into Alaska, and why-- why Dot Lake of all places?

RT: Oh yeah. - Well uh, yeah like I already said Tim, it's great tah participate with you in a in your oral presentation project. And uh. Goes back uh- quite a number of years a for me I begun high school with a fellow back in eastern Ohio in the, the salem area. And uh, - In the late 60's he came to Alaska and he and his wife settled uh In North Pole just south of Fairbanks. And uh, he was in the airline industry for a number of years. Uh working on the a cargo end of the pipeline. He was in A and P and also as a pilot and uh. He would come back uh to Ohio during summer vacations and stop and maybe if time stay a day or two with us. And kept telling me-, well you know there really is opportunity in Alaska. And I should really consider coming to Alaska. So,-Eventually in the uh. Oh this is into the early 80's. My wife and I had given it some thought and talked about it an our family came to an agreement that uh this would be a good move. Uh back in uh 1981, Paul got really tired of the uh airline industry he'd been like 12 hours a day and doing a lot of mechanical work and-. Had done that for several years. And had the opportunity to a make a change in his career. And uh, went uh to Dot Lake. Which is a group home in a small Athabascan village just between Delta Junction and Tok. Right on the Alaskan highway. Right in the foothills of the a Alaska Range-, beautiful uh location

and uh became the administrator of a group home. Had eight beds, and uh served kids there so-. My background uh undergraduate work was done at the University of Pittsburg in psychology and so I-, had also been active in a some youth work in western Pennsylvania. And so - um we decided that uh we'd like ta come up and help a Paul and Tonya at Dot Lake. And so made that move in June of 85. So uh thats kind of the background of how uh we came acquainted with some opportunities ta, do things with kids a especially troubled kids we had some interest in da, dealing with kids in a ina-, positive context. Uh back in the 70's I'd spent uh time with the uh Ohio State Troopers-, in uh law enforcement. I worked there with the Troopers for about six years. A lot of my interactions with young people at that point uh, as you might imagine was a not always positive, kind of on the negative end of things. Arresting them, uh citing them for various infractions, but uh. We thought this would be an opportunity ta deal with kids more on a positive level. And yet realizing that they were troubled kids, coming from troubled backgrounds-, troubled homes, disfunctional homes and families. And uh, recognizing that thought we could make a positive difference in the lives of a some of them. And uh decided to come an um, work with Paul and Tonya and the other staff at a Dot Lake. That's a really my introduction to uma how we decided to come. And a what my contacts were in Alaska, with uh you know oppertists, a position and a placeah to come to in making that move.

TN: Ok. You mentioned there were eight beds at Dot Lake. Were these full at all times? So was that eight kids, at all times? Or, occasionally having only seven, or what was the situation with that?

RT: Well, uh in uh most of the residential programs in the state of Alaska, um there's--there's normally a waiting list, because in the state there's less than 200 beds, to accommodate all the needs. That includes all the urban areas. All the rural areas. And so, Eh- the way ah, the state works is they contract and provide grants for non-profit agencies who do work with children. And uh. Kids that are in custody of the state even in the Division of Family Youth Services, or in Youth Services. Which is the youth corrections. Um. Have, available to them a limited number of beds. Normally there's a waiting list. If there's any openings in a program there might be uh, few days in between a, residents. Just from the moving in and moving out part, but uh-. Normally there's waiting lists and uh, most of the time all of those beds are full. With waiting list uh, you know, just a waiting the time for a, a new opening. So uh. Often times uh, uh we, we'd work with a full component of clients. And uh, course Dot Lake you know, it's a it's a nice little Athabaskan village. Beautiful little village with maybe uh 70 people. 70 residents, and uh very rural. Bout 60 miles to the closest town of any size. And um. The type of clients that would be placed at Dot Lake were kids that didn't adapt real well to urban areas. Either they would run, or have other connections involved with a, extended family or whatever and just wouldn't

stay in placement in rural ah- in urban areas. So- often times the kids that would run or not stay placed in a urban setting, would be sent to Dot Lake simply because a, it wasn't real easy to run away from Dot Lake. You had to go 60 miles to get to any place of substance. Delta Junction has a population of about, maybe 800. Tok has a population of maybe 6, 600 people. So even at that we're talking about pretty small towns. And uh, so it was interesting in that regard that we had about 80 acres. It was half of a homestead that we uh, able to do a lot of activities on. It was one of the few um residential programs allowed the use of 4-wheelers and snow machines. And we'd make uh trails and the kids could earn the priveledge of actually getting out and riding machines an- just having a great time. We had a nice swimming area there in a lake, that would warm up enough in the summer, to swim in and uh. It was in the upper Tanana River valley, so there were some streams and uh. Lot of hiking trails and uh. We had a pretty interesting program there.

TN: What was an average day like for the, the kids, yourself? And what were the age limits and the ages of the kids that you had?

RT: Well we dealt basicly with adolescent uh age kids, 12 to 18. And uh, I s'pose the average was maybe 14, 15, 16 years old, somewhere in the middle of the adolescent age group. In uh Dot Lake um, I suppose back around the late 1970's. Uh, they built a beautiful school. A two million dollar school right there, just a - Even though it's such a small

community. They had their own school. They had like, maybe two teachers and a couple of aids that ran the entire school so. The entire school population was maybe 20 to 25 kids at a given time. K uh, and that was K through 12. So was a very small school, but a very nice gym. And uh, the uh, course during the school year the kids would go to the public school. And uh, in the uh teaching family model of course there's a, a lot of emphasis placed on just providing kids' structure. So in the mornings everybody got up around 7:00, had breakfast, uh did their morning chore. Each week that would rotate, it might be like taking care of the living room. Or cleaning up the kitchen, or making sure the basement was in order. Or uh maybe just tending to their own room make sure everything was orderly before they left for school. They'd go to school, have a regular school day, we'd always bring them home to lunch. The school was just a mile away so they'd always come back to the, to the a facility for lunch. And uh, then they'd go back uh after about uh 45 minute lunch break, spend the rest of the afternoon till about 3:30, in school. Then come home-, often times there was an hour or an hour and a half of free time. Um, we had a nice little basketball court. The kids could uh maybe use up some of their 4-wheeler time or their snow machine time. Uh, then it was uh into the evening activities. Which consist of preparing supper. Uh getting ready then for a time of study. And uh, another nice thing about the model that we used there and we even use here in Kodiak is that uh, there, there's a family conference time. Which is really

the self government component, where the kids can discuss their day. And discuss any difficulties they're having, share that with their peers. Uh perhaps, um- make rule changes, or changes to the program that they feel is a, needful. And through a pretty democratic process bring change about or make adjustments to their own living style. And uh, another component of that is that each week one of the group is selected as the peer manager. And the peer manager comes and does checks on the jobs like in the morning or in the afternoon. And uh, works with the other youth to make sure everything is getting done. And then just kind of forming a chain of command, to bring information back. And uh, seeing that everybody gets their appropriate consequence or the points that they've earned for doing their job. So there's a lot of things built in to that model, an-. So that's kind of a typical day. We'd do study time have another hour or so in the evening, for kids who really enjoy computer games, or maybe watch a movie, or uh have some friends from the community enter, even go into, you know, into their own friends homes in the surrounding area. So there was that time. And then bed time was normally around 10:00 o'clock, and uh that would be a typical school day, at Dot Lake.

TN: What would be uh, atypical day?

RT: An atypical day? Uh, a non-typical day?

TN: A non-typical, way out, crazy day. Bad day for you?

RT: Well uh-

TN: You've given me the good scenario.

RT: Ok.

TN: If possible I'd like to know the bad.

RT: The bad day. Well let's see. Maybe uh, we had a mixed population there. Meaning that there was a co-ed program. And there were times um, when uh- several kids would get together. Typically either maybe like uh several boys or several of the girls and decide that they'd try to run away. And uh maybe- they'd get up early in the morning and try to, you know, make their plans and go out the back window, or wind up missing. Or having plans to be disruptive in some way. Um, that was atypical. Generally the kids would come and really buy into what they saw and uh, - There's always a honeymoon period where kids um, you know come and maybe spend uh three weeks or maybe a month and then settle in and kind of have some explosive rocky times. But then taper off into a pretty smooth um bonding with the staff and the program. So, um just considering the way the typical kid operates, we didn't have a lot of kids really being disruptive. But there were times when kids would kind of get together and make a little pact that ah, together we can be strong enough to really run away. Oh we had that happen ya in the morning or in the evening. And just have a small group of the population decide to do something out of the ordinary. And uh, generally come back have to, you know, work through that, with the staff.

TN: You said that you taught social skills and were giving structure to the youth there. Um, how did you go about this? Did you have a manual which you just opened up? Was it a

trial and error system? Combination?

RT: No. It wasn't a trial and error. We had a real precise treatment plan. The social worker would sit down and uh, we also had mental health counselors in Tok, that would visit the facility once a week. And then for individual plannings we'd take the kids into Tok for the mental health session or the, you know, the counselling sessions they were uh, assigned to. That was about a 50 mile drive so, we would generally spend maybe two afternoons a week shuttling kids to Tok. But um, basically the teaching family model was uh, developed oh, in the early 70's at the University of Kansas. And, the first program was at Larent, Kansas. It was called Achievement Place. And uh, Lonnie Phillips was uh and Monte Wolf were the two that put this uh program together. It developed into a model. Eventually it was adopted at Boy's Town. Boy's Town is a large agency in Omaha, Nebraska that uh, really refined the model and broke it down into a kind of a cottage/home like setting. Rather than an institutional model, where you'd have like shift work and you know, staff doing specialized jobs. The concept in the teaching family model is to make it as home like as possible. And uh to, make the setting as deinstitutionalized, if you will, to the kids. So that the kid has as much of a natural living environment as could possibly be offered,-- of a facility. So uh the family teachers are given a preservice workshop. It gives the basic principles of, of a -- social theory. Social learning theory that would uh, teach

reenforcement, and uh how to get kids to respond in a positive way. There's a whole set of skills that have been developed that uh, come from more or less a conceptual area that's matched with a presented problem. And then the presented problem develops into a whole curriculum of social skills-

TN: ... To much static on tape. Can't understand...

RT: The kids learn some basic stuff like accepting, uh, no for an answer. Or being able to problem solve on his own. So, it's a whole progression of skills that leads to uh progressively more difficult skills. And as the child works through that and learns basic skills, in meeting everyday needs, um becomes much more adaptable to being in control of his or her own life. So, it's a pretty well defined model and uh, it um- I suppose would be classed more in the cognant of behavioral areas of models. It's not, it's not just pure behaviorism because we do ask the kids to, you know think through things. And uh there's a cognant of element in it. So uh based on that we uh have a pretty interesting model. Course it's a flexible. It's not real rigid, it's not real um inflexible. I mean the day that we live in and the challenges that we find-, there has to be some flexibility. So even within the structure of the motivational system. A kid comes in and he's placed on a point card. That's called a daily system or the daily motivation system. And after about uh 4 to 6 weeks on daily, a kid will move to a weekly system, - where they're buying priveledges for a week at a time instead of a day at a time. And then acheivement is a level after maybe four months into the program where

the youth is actually, negotiating for real life or real meaningful priveledges rather than points. In other words they can negotiate for more money in their allowance, or more time on the phone, or later to bed at night, or you know, extra visits to their friend's home in the community, or whatever. So it becomes more adapted to what really happens when they leave the program. Versus a simple point system. With a point system, generally when you go to work you don't get points. You can negotiate for more real life stuff. So that's kind of the way it works. And uh, it seems to work real well, um- Spent time in rural Alaska and uh the traditional extended family um culture that really does exist in rural Alaska is quite well adapted I think to the model we use in caring for the kids. Um, I think it does add some structure. But the home like setting really adapts well to the, more less the extended family culture that you find in so many parts of rural Alaska. So we've been I think real interested in seeing it work, um from that perspective.

TN: And more than not it did work?

RT: Oh, I think so.

TN: Real positive?

RT: I think that could be said, sure. Often times you wonder what kind of an impact you're having with kids, and uh you don,t see instant results of course, uh at times. In fact we've had kids call back maybe a couple years after they left the program an- it was at that point of time that things were begining to make sense. We would talk to them in Dot

Lake, in Nome, or in Kodiak. So uh - Often times it takes awhile for them to just kind of explore what they have been taught. And sometimes structure is a pretty new concept to them because, often times if they come from really disfunctional families there's not a lot of structure. They're kind of just left on their own. So to provide them with structure and set meal times and bed times and um, you know getting up at a certain time in the morning, is something that they maybe have done but not on a real consistant way. So to do that day after day after day brings some order to their lives, that they might not have had before. And they don't always just readily understand that. But down the road it seems like sometimes it does sink in, and they'll call back and say, well it makes sense to me now. So I guess that's what keeps us all in the business.

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