

ARA – Community Cares  
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Kids Who Care For Others End Up Caring About Themselves, Too.

In a modest neighborhood of tidy homes in western Ohio, a young teenager is busy shoveling a snow-covered driveway as an elderly woman watches in appreciation from her window.

Is it her grandson maybe? Or an enterprising neighborhood kid looking to make a few bucks? Actually, it's neither. It's a boy she's never met from a town she's never heard of. But that doesn't matter to the boy or to the woman.

That's because the teenager is a student at Starr Commonwealth, a national child and family services organization in Ohio and Michigan with programs for troubled youth. Here, struggling teens, many of whom have been in trouble with the law, live and work together in an atmosphere of dignity, respect and hope. Starr students are a very visible presence in the community and can often be found volunteering around town, including shoveling snow or mowing grass for elderly neighbors. Neighbors in Van Wert know that Starr kids aren't bad kids, just kids who've made bad decisions and are looking for ways to make things right in their lives.

"They're part of our community, these kids, and a lot of us think of them as our own," says one local resident.

It's been nearly a hundred years since Starr Commonwealth founder Floyd Starr first set forth his revolutionary philosophy on the treatment of troubled youth. He was convinced that struggling teens are often struggling inside with issues of self-esteem and worthiness. Helping them recognize their own strengths, then building on those strengths, can begin to build up

what has been torn down. Giving kids opportunities to help others is a central pillar in that re-building.

“Uncle” Floyd believed that all people can be contributing community members with a commitment to social interest and volunteerism. In fact, he said, it’s absolutely essential to a person’s own healthy self-image. All Starr Commonwealth programs, from residential treatment programs to foster care services to private boarding schools for girls and for boys are all built around this service learning model.

Starr Commonwealth success stories abound. James was a teenage boy who could do no right, at least in his own eyes. He’d been diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome before coming to Starr. Asperger’s can be a socially isolating condition. Those who suffer from it can’t always “read” other people’s social cues which in turn can make them act inappropriately in social situations. It wasn’t until 16-year old James began volunteering to help developmentally disabled adults at a nearby riding stable that he began to bloom. “When James first came here to volunteer, he was so shy and quiet. He apologized for absolutely everything,” says one of the riding instructors. Today, James is a much happier kid – confident, capable and engaged.

“To a troubled kid who’s been told he’s no good over and over again, feeling the glow from helping someone who needs it isn’t just a good feeling. It’s liberating,” says Starr psychologist Dr. Jim Longhurst.

Starr Commonwealth is a child and family services organization with nearly a century of experience in treating troubled youth and their families. For more information about Starr Commonwealth or the No Disposable Kids (NDK) training program to help build healthy school environments, call 800-837-5591 or visit their websites at [www.starr.org](http://www.starr.org) or [www.ndk.org](http://www.ndk.org).