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THE IMPACT OF FRENCH CAMP ACADEMY  
ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Meek School of Journalism and New Media

by

JI HOON HEO

August 2016

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## ABSTRACT

Within the last few decades, child abuse and neglect has not improved in the United States. Government services provides facilities and licensed families for abused and neglected children, but children often do not adjust due to negative past experiences. However, there are other non-governmental programs that help counter child abuse and neglect. This research focuses on one student attending French Camp Academy, a Christian-based boarding school in central Mississippi, in order to shed light on possible ways to stop the vicious cycle that children go through. When children receive the acknowledgment and support from a parental figure, they are more likely to change their negative behaviors and eventually contribute in their future society. The paper will abbreviate French Camp Academy as FCA from here on.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all those that helped make this thesis possible. Thank you to Skylyr Effler for being part of my documentary. Your strength and courage inspired me to become a better person. Thank you to the Taylor Dorm kids for all the ping pong and basketball games. It was a pleasure getting to know you all and I can confidently say I have new brothers in FCA. Thank you to Lance Ragsdale and Stewart Edwards for giving me full access to FCA campus. Without their support, the documentary would not have been possible. Thank you to dorm parents Mr. and Mrs. Martin for allowing me to stay in the dorm with the kids. Your acquaintance and storytelling made the thesis process all the more merrier. Thank you to my thesis chair committee Mikki Harris for believing in me until the very last minute. You've helped me believe in myself when I doubted myself. Thank you to professor Atkins and Dr. Schultz for being so patient with me through the process. Your proofreading and advice during the last few days have been invaluable. Thank you to my fiancé for dealing with all the hectic schedules and understanding me as I worked on the thesis. To all my friends, family, and mentors, thank you for making my two years at Ole Miss an amazing experience.

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## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this documentary project is to raise awareness of child abuse and neglect in the United States. This documentary project is not a depressing story, but rather a story about a kid named Skylyr Effler who rises above to beat the negative statistics that Mississippi has. The viewer will better understand child abuse in the United States and some of the possible solutions that are in place.

Mississippi consistently receives negative press. It ranks in the top 10 for STD (CDC, 2014), highest in poverty (NY Times, 2014), worst in education (Morse, 2016) and health (United Health Foundation, 2015). The positive statistics on Mississippi are barely highlighted in the media despite the fact that Mississippi ranks second in the nation for charitable giving after Utah (Bever, 2014). The story of Skylyr Effler, a current junior in FCA is a common example of how one Mississippi charitable organization had helped him become a positive statistic. The justification for this thesis project is that this story sheds light on a possible solution for the cycle of negative environmental factors that Mississippi faces. The future of Mississippi relies on its children and if they are brought up in a safe and positive environment, the children may be able to change the negative image of Mississippi.

Skylyr Effler grew up in Asheville, North Carolina, with his brother, Chase. Growing up was not the easiest since his dad was alcoholic and highly abusive. When he was five years old,

his father used to give him moonshine for entertainment (Personal communication, 2016). As a young age, Effler's view on fatherhood was much different than other normal kids. His brother, Chase, despite being naughty outside the house, would always protect him. Chase would be the buffer so that the father did not get to his younger brother Skylyr.

In 2008, Mrs. Effler was able to finalize the divorce in North Carolina but the effects of abuse were still lingering. Chase had begun showing negative behaviors and rebelling against his mother due to the fact that he never had a father figure. Mrs. Effler decided to send Chase and Skylyr to the boarding school after remembering that her cousin had attended FCA for behavioral problems in the 1980s.

In the fall of 2009, Chase and Skylyr enrolled in FCA, a boarding school for troubled kids in central Mississippi. Chase was 11 and Skylyr was 9 years old. The difference between FCA and other boarding schools was that all the kids in the dorms had "dorm parents" who nurtured them and helped them throughout their individual journey. Many times, the dorm parents stayed with them until they graduated from high school.

"I hated it and I was so bitter towards my mom," said Skylyr about his first experience when he arrived in FCA (Personal communication, 2016). Shortly after, he and his brother were sent to Taylor Dorm where Randy Martin was the dorm father. Martin, with his athletic background and charismatic and masculine figure, was able to connect with Skylyr and provide him with the father figure and structure that Skylyr sought.

Before Skylyr came to FCA he struggled with very low self-esteem and would be easily pushed around by his peers. His low self-esteem stemmed from being abused by his father, who



sometimes would strangle him to the point of death. Other times, his father would burn him with cigarettes.

“I remember I had a father-son moment with Skylyr for the first time,” said Martin. “He was in 7th grade and there was one dorm mate that had bullied him for a while and he finally took my word and stood up. He took him down and I enjoyed it a bit before breaking the argument” (Personal communication, 2016). At that moment, Skylyr understood what it felt like for someone to be proud of him. Roughly one year later, Skylyr told Martin that he would follow him and listen to his every word as a son would.

Chase graduated last year and is now attending Columbia International University in South Carolina while Skylyr is now a junior in FCA. The two brothers have undergone a great transformation since they first stepped foot in FCA.

Skylyr, the main character of the documentary, is evidence that the FCA helps counter child abuse in the state of Mississippi. A study done in Taiwan concluded that abused children were more likely to become bullies themselves (Yen, 2015). Non-governmental programs such as FCA may help stop the cycle of child abuse.

## **BACKGROUND**

The following section consists of background information relating to definitions of child abuse and neglect and the history of FCA. Although the United States has its own definition of child abuse and neglect, each state has its own modified definitions. The history of FCA was provided by the official FCA website and Lance Ragsdale, FCA VP of Development.

### **History of French Camp Academy**

The Central Mississippi Institute for Girls was first founded in 1885 by Scotch-Irish Christians (FrenchCamp.org, 2016). After immediate success, the FCA for boys was started the same year. In 1915 the schools merged and became co-ed. In 1950, a major change took place under the direction of an interdenominational Board of Trustees that distanced themselves itself from the Presbyterian church to receive funding from other denominations. Since then, FCA's mission has been to "provide a safe, healthy, community for young people from all over the country nestled in tall southern pines located in rural Mississippi away from many distractions and negative influences of our culture" (FrenchCamp.org, 2016). It currently accommodates approximately 170 students with the support they need to create a positive impact in their society.

According to Vice President of Development Lance Ragsdale, FCA operates with a \$25 million endowment, which generates roughly \$1 million a year. The average operating cost per year is roughly \$6.2 million. Out of that, \$3 million has to be raised through private funds and the other \$2 million is generated through tuition collection and the inn and cafe that FCA operates. A majority of the students do not pay the full tuition. Most students are brought to FCA by their guardians or parents due to behavioral problems although some social workers also suggest FCA to some guardians (Personal communication, 2016).

## **Definitions**

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014), child abuse means “Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (2014). On top of the federal definition of “child abuse,” each state has its own definition. According to the Mississippi Department of Human Services (2014), an “Abused Child means a child whose parent, guardian or custodian or any person responsible for his care or support, whether legally obligated to do so or not, has caused or allowed to be caused upon said child sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, emotional abuse, mental injury, non-accidental physical injury or other maltreatment. Provided, however that physical discipline, including spanking, performed on a child by a parent, guardian or custodian in a reasonable manner shall not be deemed abuse under this section” (2014). Under Mississippi law, guardians may use corporal punishment as long as it does not cause bruises,

marks, or other injuries (Bressman, 2012). According to the Mississippi Department of Human Services (2015), a child pertains to anyone under the age of 18 (2015). Abuse and neglect can be distinguished by the following: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, exploitation, emotional abuse, and abandonment (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

### **History of Child Abuse and Neglect Laws**

In 1974, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was enacted to provide funding with the mission to protect children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Since then, the CAPTA had been revised several times (2011). In 2010, there were 702,000 children in the U.S. who were subject to some abuse (Bressman, 2012). In 2013-2014, there were 8,756 reported victims of child abuse and neglect in Mississippi (Mississippi Department of Human Services, 2014). These numbers require massive sums of money as it costs approximately \$124 billion a year for investigating and other costs related to child abuse and neglect (Child Help, 2008).

Congress implemented the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which gives all children the right to “live in a permanent home that is free of abuse and neglect (Bressman, 2012). Despite the revisions and new legislations to protect children, there has been a discontent with the way the state handled child welfare. In 2004, Olivia Y., et al. filed a lawsuit against Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour and the Director of the Department of Human Services and the Director of the Division of Family and Children Services (Bressman, 2012). The lawsuit went on for several years and achieved many agreements on improving child welfare in the State

of Mississippi. According to a video interview with Patricia Digby and Melody Hamilton from Social Work Department at the University of Mississippi, they stated that the lawsuit had impacted the legislation even to this day (Personal communication, 2016). The agreement also includes an increase in social workers in child services (Personal communication, 2016)

## METHODOLOGY

The past events and the pain that Effler experienced is difficult to explain in words. The power of multimedia helps viewers grasp Effler's inner struggles as he tells his sympathetic and powerful story. Although the numbers of abused victims (8,756) in the *Harvard Law School* (2012) journal may be compelling, they do not do justice in explaining what these children go through. Along with Skylyr, other sources and experts are used throughout the documentary to keep the shots more unpredictable to capture the viewer's attention.

The most difficult part in doing this story was getting the access. Dealing with individuals lives, especially when dealing with kids who still stay in contact with their abusive father, could pose a danger to them. I had to carefully choose my characters and subjects with the help of Lance Ragsdale, the vice president of development, to make sure that everyone was safe. Upon interviewing several kids, I was able to come across Skylyr Effler. Before doing any shooting, I noticed he was camera shy. The first day and a half I was in FCA, I did not carry a camera but carried an iPad to take note of what he did throughout the day. The day and a half of getting to know him without hovering around him with big equipment became advantageous because he was much more comfortable with me the next few days I was shadowing him.

The disadvantage of doing the documentary project was the fact that sometimes numbers may go unnoticed that may pertain to the story. I was able to counter this with a thesis paper that

deals with child abuse on a national level as well as state level. Some statistics were included in the documentary as well.

I first began gathering data and information on FCA in 2015 December. I made contact with the FCA president Stewart Edwards and he quickly connected me with Lance Ragsdale. He was able to pick out five characters that signed waivers to be recorded, but after recording Skylyr, I realized one character was enough to tell the story. After visiting couple times to tour of the campus and receive a background check, I went to FCA to start shooting the documentary. My first visit, I spent a whole week there getting to know the family, Skylyr, and how FCA operates. The typical day started at 5:30 am when Skylyr and ended around 9 pm. Most of the time, I shadowed him at a distance and observed to see which parts may be valuable to the documentary. By the end of the shoot, I ended up with 150 gigabytes worth of footage and audio. I viewed all the footages again and split them into days and then split them into moments. Once I had a clearer picture of my content, I used a whiteboard to storyboard my documentary. This made the editing process much easier.

## **RESULTS**

### **The Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect**

Abused children can be affected physically and psychologically, and thus suffer long-term and short-term effects. The long-term physical effects included “impaired brain development, allergies, asthma, arthritis, high blood pressure, and ulcers,” the short-term can be “minor scrapes and bruises to extremely severe injuries or even death, and psychologically, it can lead to “low self-esteem, depression, and relationship difficulties into adulthood (Bressman, 2012).

Many of the children in FCA suffer from the psychological and physical effects of child abuse. The effects of child abuse cannot be undone, but, as Bressman explains it, “resilience,” the child’s ability to manage and respond to a negative experience (2012, page 2), can be built through “community stability and the support of other adults,” which is provided by FCA.

FCA counselor Karen Cates says horse therapy can be helpful setting her students to open up (Personal communication, 2016). The horse can be a means of communication. Cates is able to read the child’s emotions by reading the horse’s emotions as they interact with each other. “When a child is anxious, I am able to see it in the horse. The horse reacts to whatever the child is feeling,” said Cates.



A study done by Meuwissen and England (2016) concluded that a father figure is necessary for children in developing their executive functions and to become successful adults (2016). A majority of the children in FCA either have no father figure or abusive parents or guardians who stall their progress into adulthood. Before they come to FCA, they have absolutely no structure in their lives.

Comparatively, a study from the *Journal of Child & Family Studies* found that a father's absence could lead to psychiatric problems in the future (Teel, Verdelli, et. al., 2016). The study also showed that children with no fathers were more exposed to higher rates of poverty, adverse life events, and lower levels of perceived social support.

### **The Vicious Cycle of Child Abuse and Neglect**

When a child is abused, neglected, or abandoned, the Department of Human Services has the responsibility to protect the child (Robbins, 1974). The agency first finds relatives of the child and analyzes his/her competency. If the child has no able relative, the agency places him or her in facilities if he or she is over 10 years old or in foster care (Hamilton, 2016). Children often jump from family to family for several reasons. The most common reason is due to incompatibility. Abused and neglected children are psychologically unstable and fear attachment with their foster family (Hamilton, 2016). Patricia Digby (2016), Education Training Specialist at the University of Mississippi, said that children fear attachment because they don't want to be left alone again (2016). The children also have trouble trusting anyone. The children will be transferred from facilities to families until they are emancipated when they are 18 years old.

Without the support and structure in their childhood, they become part of the vicious cycle that continues to affect children.

### **The Impact of French Camp Academy in Effler's Life**

By exploring the life of Skylyr Effler, I was able to confirm the literature review in my research. Martin explained that when he first arrived in FCA, he had a big problem with low self-esteem, which could be one of the long-term psychological effect from child abuse (Personal communication, 2016). Effler had trouble trusting people and tried to do to have his existence acknowledged. A father figure like Martin provided the support and structure in Effler's life to make a difference in Effler's future. Effler is now looking forward to sending in applications for college and becoming a great father just as Martin displayed in the dorm house.

Child abuse and neglect is a complex and sometimes ambiguous subject. There are many other angles that future documentarians can explore, such as the students from FCA who may have ended up in a negative way. Although the majority of the students in FCA come out with positive results, others end up leaving before positive change can take place.

FCA fights child abuse and neglect by providing a support system and a structure in their academy. The structure is highly important because FCA's population is composed of children and teenagers that have negative behaviors. Without the structure and rigorous scheduling, the academy could have a negative influence on the students. The support provided by FCA is vital because many of the dorm parents either graduated from FCA in the past or went through child abuse and neglect. FCA is a valuable place in fighting child abuse and neglect but it is rarely

known. Improving their marketing campaign could help fund the \$6.2 million needed for operations. With more funding, it will be easier to expand and possibly be replicated in other cities.

## CONCLUSION

In my journey to learn about the state I now call home and after hearing about this story from Dr. Wenger, professor of Journalism at the University of Mississippi, I traveled to FCA. It was fascinating for me to hear that Mississippi, a state that is often looked down upon, had these little gem pockets that impact the nation in many ways. It wasn't until I first visited FCA that I realized the problem of child abuse was hidden, not just Mississippi but all over the United States. I began to research the statistics and found out that Mississippi ranked 50th in overall child well-being, according to the *Clarion Ledger* (Mitchell, 2015). If the next generation of Mississippians could have the support and education that help transition them into adulthood, they can change the future of Mississippi. I learned through this project that I too could be part of the change.

I would like to continue to stay in contact with FCA and Effler to shoot his progress and to see where he ends up. Although I was able to spend several weeks with him, if I were to spend even more time, I would be able to capture more of his weekly and monthly struggles as he becomes a man. The movie *Boyhood* (2012) shows the life of a boy for 12 years. I would like to try to get at least a whole year and see Effler off to college. The documentary could then be lengthened to a full 26-minute or hour project.

The goal of this thesis was to dig deeper into the lives of abused children, specifically in FCA, and how non-governmental programs prevent them from becoming a thorn in society. I feel like I was able to show it visually and through language by attaining close access to the characters involved in the project. These kids deserve the right to have the same support as everyone else. We never know who they might end up being.

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## VITA

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