

Making a Difference —



**It Starts with
A Day**

Stephanie P. Skaff

On May 17, 2014, I gathered with twenty other lawyers and volunteers in the San Francisco cold. We loaded ourselves into two large white vans for the long drive to La Honda, California, where we would be planting gardens with students at San Francisco's Log Cabin Ranch.

Log Cabin Ranch is a school for adjudicated juveniles. As we drove the winding road down the coast, our driver—a thirty-three-year veteran employee of the ranch—told us a little about the kids and the school. The boys at the ranch, he said, are often viewed as the “worst of the worst.” They are sent to the ranch because they have committed serious crimes—drug crimes, armed robberies, gang shootings. Most people have given up on these kids, he told us. But, he said, Log Cabin Ranch is a second chance for them. And then he said something that really stuck with me: “These kids are not disposable.”

He was right. The kids of Log Cabin Ranch are not disposable. In fact, they are pretty amazing. Don't get me wrong. These are kids who have made some very bad decisions in their lives. But on that day in May, we did not see their bad decisions. We saw them shine.

Before we arrived at the ranch, all of The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) volunteers had sent in pictures of their favorite pet or animal. Each of the ranch students had selected one of the animal pictures, and we each paired up for the day's work with the student who had chosen our pet or animal.

There are no fences or security walls or barbed wire at the Log Cabin Ranch. It is beautiful, open, and surprisingly peaceful. The main campus buildings—a dormitory, classrooms, a kitchen, and staff offices—all face a large inner courtyard.

After some gardening instructions from our friends at Urban Sprouts, we began hauling dirt in large wheelbarrows into this inner courtyard, shoveling the dirt into the designated areas around the courtyard, and preparing the soil for planting. Some of us worked on bedded areas, while others unloaded soil into large, new planter boxes that the students had crafted in their school woodshop. After all of the areas were prepared, we planted flowers and shrubs and small trees using a landscape design that the students had created as part of a classroom project.

As we worked side by side with the ranch students, conversations sprang up naturally. Talk often started with the animal pictures that brought us together: “Why did you pick my [dog, bird, guinea pig, horse, goldfish]?” “Do you have a pet at home?” We also talked easily about our shared work. “Do we need another wheelbarrow of dirt?” “What do you think about these flowers for the front of the planter box?”



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Soon, however, we were discussing all sorts of topics: classes, sports, college plans, work, hobbies, family, and life at the ranch. We began to know these kids as people—unique people with their own goals, talents, and interests. We ate lunch together on the sunny patio. With appetites kicked into gear from a morning of hard work, the barbecued ribs and corn on the cob grilled by the ranch cooks tasted delicious. Conversation flowed effortlessly at every table, punctuated by smiles and laughter.

After lunch, some of the boys and volunteers joined in to play a little basketball out on the courts. Others continued talking. One student happened to mention to me that he wrote poems. When I said I liked poetry, he disappeared and then returned almost immediately to hand me a composition book filled with his poems. They were really good—the kind of poems that you want to read out loud, rolling the language from your tongue and pausing after each line (see page 9 for a sample).

How, I wondered to myself, did this bright and talented poet end up in our juvenile justice system?

At BASE, we talk with justifiable pride about our amazing “pipeline” programs—programs to support and encourage diverse students to attend college and law school, thus expanding the pipeline to diversity in our profession. At Log Cabin Ranch, we learned about another type of pipeline: they called it “the school to prison” pipeline. The school to prison pipeline has been described by experts as a disturbing national trend where students of color and students with disabilities are increasingly funneled out of public schools and into the criminal and juvenile justice systems. Once in the system, these students find themselves in juvenile detention facilities that often offer few, if any educational services.

The pipeline to prison usually begins with an under-resourced public school. With overcrowded classrooms

and insufficient funding for critical support services like counselors and special education teachers, students from low-income communities are often left to struggle on their own to overcome challenges like learning disabilities, abuse, and neglect—all of which make school success significantly more difficult. Students feel isolated and overwhelmed. Truancy increases, compounding and contributing to a downward spiral of poor academic performance. Absence from school also means more time on the street, with more opportunity to join and participate in drugs, gangs, and other criminal activity.

Experts says that even when at-risk students show up to school, zero-tolerance school policies can lead to the criminalization of conduct that might otherwise be addressed more effectively with social and educational services and intervention. Studies show that students of color are far more likely than their white counterparts to be suspended, expelled, or arrested for the same type of conduct

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at school. And students with learning disabilities are most likely to travel down the pipeline from school to prison.

What can be done to close off this destructive school to prison pipeline? I do not claim to have the answers. But I do know that Log Cabin Ranch is making an effort to provide the educational and counseling resources that can help reverse the downward spiral for students already in the system.

The Log Cabin Ranch students are forty-five miles away from negative peer environments, they are disconnected from technology and other distractions, they have consistent routines and healthy food, and they are supported with therapy and counseling. And most importantly, because they live at the ranch school, all of them attend regularly scheduled classes and get needed educational support—many are now experiencing academic success for the very first time in their lives.

In fact, one of the things that struck me most during our day at the Log Cabin Ranch was that the lead ranch teacher—an employee of the San Francisco Unified School District—was out there with us, working side by side with the students as we planted the gardens around the school campus. You could see how committed he was to the school and to the success of each of these boys.

No doubt, shutting down the school to prison pipeline needs to start well before a student arrives at Log Cabin Ranch. But as we all concluded that day, these Log Cabin Ranch students are not lost causes. With the right support and opportunities, each of them can experience success.

At the end of the day, after we cleaned up the gardening areas with the boys, one of the older students gave us an engaging tour of the extended campus, including a vegetable garden and a stage and outbuildings that the students had built themselves. This student was so articulate—I know that more than a few of our volunteers were picturing him as a courtroom lawyer sometime in the future. We were delighted to learn that he already had been admitted to college and would begin attending in August when he left the ranch.

The costs of not investing in the rehabilitation of youth offenders is staggering. The *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* found that youth offenders who become adult offenders can each cost society as much as \$1.7 million in crimes and incarceration over a lifetime. Residential facilities like Log Cabin Ranch are expensive, but successful rehabilitation of our in-risk youth (those presently involved with the juvenile and criminal justice system) is not only crucial, it is cost-effective.

As our BASF volunteers loaded into the vans for the drive back to San Francisco, we were tired, a little sore, and painfully aware that we were leaving and going back to our friends and families, and the ranch kids were not.

These Log Cabin Ranch students are not disposable. They are engaging, creative, smart, and funny. They are ambitious and hard working. They were not leaving the ranch that day, but each of them will leave the ranch when their time is finished. And the effort put into preparing them for that time when it arrives—connecting them with opportunities and mentors, providing them with education and support—will make a world of difference in the path they take after they leave.

That May day at Log Cabin Ranch was one of the most rewarding volunteer efforts I have ever experienced. And I was not alone in feeling that way—many of the other volunteers expressed the same sentiment. We are committed to continuing our support for the ranch. With the help of many of our volunteers, including cochairs Hayward Gilliam of Covington & Burling and Jeffrey Bornstein of K&L Gates, we are exploring the possibility of a sustained BASF partnership with Log Cabin Ranch to help support the students and the mission. If you would like to be part of that effort or are interested in volunteering for future BASF events at Log Cabin Ranch, please send your name and contact information to Julie Traun at jtraun@sfbbar.org.

Thank you. Remember—giving back Starts With A Day!

Stephanie P. Skaff is chair of Farella Braun + Martel's Intellectual Property Litigation Department and is the 2014 president of The Bar Association of San Francisco.

A teenage resident of San Francisco's Log Cabin Ranch, who during our discussions shared with me his entire portfolio of poems, copied out this special poem (*Remember*) by hand for me to take with me when I left. I was touched by his gift, by his poetry, and by the insight into his life. I will remember him.

-Stephanie Skaff

(Remember)

Remember the brocken promises
Remember the despare, and disbelief
Remember the heartaches, and distruction
Remember the lies, and injust dicesions
Remember the shame, famine, and grief
Remember the lost dreams and hopeless nights.
Remember the unanswered cries for help.
of tears. Remember those cold nights and warm streams
and empty classrooms. Remember those overfilling cemetarys
years and friendless months. Remember the fatherless
als, tribulations, and headaches. Remember the tri-
compelling light at the end of the neveren-
ding tunnel. Remember the promise of a be-
tter tomorrow. Remember the meaningless ca-
use, worth dying for. Remember the blood sh-
ed and countless bodies droqing at the hands
of warfare. Remember the good times over pow-
ering, and overwicqhing the bad times.
Remember life befor death
remember me