KaBOOM!

How One Man Built a Movement to Save Play

Darell Hammond, cofounder and CEO of KaBOOM!

Foreword by Stuart L. Brown, MD, Founder of the National Institute of Play
A lot of mental health professionals talk about “breaking the cycle”—that is, trying to prevent people who grow up in an unhealthy environment from repeating the same problems as adults and teaching those same behaviors to their kids. For me, this idea has an extremely powerful meaning.

My father was one of 16 children. Today the word would be “dysfunctional,” but back then the family was probably just called “bad.” The state of Nebraska certainly thought so: It took all 16 children from their parents—my grandparents—who were declared unfit. (At the time there were only 15 of them, but my father’s mother was pregnant with the 16th.) When my grandparents were later given a chance to get their kids back, they said no.

The state did what it could to keep the siblings together, but with a family that big, it was impossible. Four or five of the older boys were too old for an orphanage and got sent to a reform school instead. My father was raised by foster parents and later joined the Marines, where he served for 9 years. But the cycle would continue. Many of his brothers and sisters went on to have huge families: seven children, 13 children. One of my uncles had 11 kids from three different marriages.

There were eight of us. I was born in 1971, the second youngest. At that time we were living in Jerome, Idaho, a tiny town in the southern
part of the state, but my family had moved around a lot back then, and most of my older siblings had been born somewhere else. We moved so often, partly so that my father could find work, but from what I understand, I think it was also to escape growing debts. The family lived in a few places in northern California and then moved on to Idaho. We ended up in Jerome because my father got a job as a ranch hand there around 1970. He had long worked with horses. A mustang kick once broke his right leg in two places below the knee.

Not long after we got to Jerome, he found a job as a long-haul trucker, a job that would take him away from us for days at a time. In October 1972, when I was 19 months old and my younger sister was a newborn, my father said he was going to unload a truck, and he never came back.

My mom was left trying to raise eight children by herself. She worked multiple jobs—one at a senior center, another with the Girl Scouts—but the bills began to pile up. According to what my older siblings tell me, we became the town charity. On holidays, my mother often had to work, so we were left on our own for Thanksgiving and Christmas. A lot of nights, our dinner was sandwiches of butter and sugar on white bread. The older kids started skipping school, ostensibly to take care of the younger ones, but they sometimes ended up getting into trouble, and their frequent absences eventually got the attention of social workers. The struggle became too much for my mother, and the county threatened to take us from her and split up the family. They talked about putting us in foster care—the cycle repeating. Instead, we all wound up at an institution called Mooseheart, 43 miles due west of Chicago and, at the time, surrounded by farmland.

Mooseheart is a storied place. It was founded in 1913 by Moose International, the fraternal organization that dates back to the late 1800s. Moose is similar to the Elks Lodge—the story goes that the founder wanted a mascot that was bigger than an elk, so he opted for a moose. Today the organization still has more than a million members, mostly in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. The Moose members still provide virtually all of the funding for Mooseheart along with a similar facility outside of Jacksonville, Florida, for senior citizens. About $28 of each member’s annual dues is allocated to fund the two facilities; they represent the main charities that Moose supports.

And at a time when school districts across the country are cutting their budgets, eliminating sports teams, laying off teachers, and getting rid of music and art programs, Moose members are still giving their all to Mooseheart, which hasn’t had to take any of these steps.

During most of the 20th century, Mooseheart was seen as a kind of insurance policy for members of the fraternity. If something happened to you, your children could go there and be taken care of. They’d be raised in a safe environment, and they’d get an education. At its height, during the Depression, Mooseheart housed more than 1,200 kids, but by the time I showed up the attendance was more like 300; it’s down to about 250 today.

The campus looks more like a college than an orphanage or group home, with about 1,200 acres of lush lawns, a lake, and residence halls that look more like private homes (a significant upgrade from the barracks-style living arrangements of my early days at Mooseheart, where at times we had 24 boys sleeping in a single room). For decades the facility operated its own post office and fire department and even generated its own electricity. It also maintained a farm and dairy, where a lot of the food for the kids was grown and raised, though in recent years remote slices of the land have been sold off, including the farm, to help cover operating costs.

More than 11,000 kids have come through Mooseheart in its nearly 100 years of operation. During the first 60 or 70 years, the institution accepted children only if their parents were members of Moose International. Eventually that policy was relaxed to allow more distant family, as long as they had some relation to a member. (In my case it was an uncle, our mother’s brother.) And in 1994, membership in the fraternity stopped being a requirement at all. Families now apply, and if a child’s need is deemed legitimate, if he or she can abide by the rules and guidelines of the facility, and if there is space, they’re in.
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My earliest memory is the 1,600-mile flight from Idaho to Chicago. I was 4 years old, and I spent the flight curled up on the floor to try and escape the cigarette smoke that hung heavy in the air. I hate that smell to this day.

When my family landed at O'Hare, people from the Mooseheart staff picked us up in two station wagons for the hour-long drive west to the campus, near Aurora, Illinois. Once we got there, my siblings and I spent a few weeks living together in a single dorm building, called Arizona Hall, where we learned the rules of the place and got all our vaccinations. After that we were split up by age and sent to different “houses,” which is what the residence halls are called. That term is pretty accurate—they’re much more like houses than dorms. Most are named for the state Moose association and chapter that raised the money to build and maintain them. I initially lived in what they called Baby Village. The houses are organized by age and gender, so you move a lot, typically every year when you’re younger and every 2 years once you’re older. That arrangement meant that I never lived with any of my brothers or sisters during my 14 years at Mooseheart.

When people find out I grew up in a place like this, they always assume I’m an orphan. It’s a reasonable assumption, but it isn’t accurate in my case. All eight of us arrived escorted by our mom. A great element of Mooseheart back then was that mothers were allowed to live on the campus if they wanted to remain close to their children, and our mom did. She stayed there until my younger sister, the last Hammond kid, graduated from Mooseheart High School nearly 15 years later.

Some might imagine an orphanage to be miserable, like something out of a Charles Dickens novel. But I’m very lucky to have been raised at Mooseheart. Our upbringing certainly was unusual and probably more disciplined than most, largely due to the complex logistics of raising a few hundred children together. The limits and strict rules of Mooseheart were good for me, and I imagine good for most of us who were raised there. The boys’ and girls’ campuses were completely separated, for example. I remember not being allowed to walk on the grass around the buildings—even as children we had to walk on pathways. We had few belongings, basically one box of stuff, something like a foot locker, which made the annual moves quick and painless. Whistles blew when we had to be somewhere, and you needed written permission to move from one building to another at certain times, like during school hours, after dark, or whenever you were supposed to be somewhere specific, whether it was church or mealtime.

Our family vacations were a little unusual. Mooseheart has a 300-acre lake on the property, complete with a cabin on its shore. Once or twice a year, especially when I was young, my mom reserved the cabin for us, and my brothers and sisters and I would all go spend the night, lined up on the floor in sleeping bags. My mom always made fried dough for us, like the elephant ears you get at state fairs. I couldn’t get enough of it, slathered in peanut butter. The cabin also had a working fireplace; my brother Pat and I were Boy Scouts, and we would build the biggest, hottest, most raging fire we could. In the middle of winter, the cabin would be 90 degrees inside. As I got older, these trips became less frequent, partly because my brothers and sisters had all graduated and moved away. In hindsight I realize they weren’t much like a typical family vacation. We would only go for a single night, not even 24 hours, and we were less than a mile from the residences, close enough that we always walked both ways. But they’re good memories and really the only time I recall my entire family being together in the 15 years I lived at Mooseheart.

On the whole we were happy. We didn’t know any different—we thought all kids lived this way. Our food was good. A central kitchen delivered three meals a day to each house. The house parents, who served as live-in chaperones for each residence hall, rarely cooked, and that was probably for the best; many were young and often not given
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much training. Our laundry was done for us in an industrial facility on campus. Every student got a code that had to be marked on all clothes so they could be sorted out. Mine was H-322, and my brother Pat’s was H-321—the H stood for Hammond. After he outgrew some of his clothes, I got his hand-me-downs.

We had a beautiful, huge campus as our playground. There were lots of trees (climbing trees was a favorite pastime for me—I once built a horizontal ladder that connected two trees to each other), the lake, a set of swings and two playgrounds, a sandbox, several basketball courts, and athletic fields in different places throughout the campus. You could always find pockets of kids somewhere to play with and pickup games to start or join.

We attended a school on campus, though I didn’t love academics. I worked hard and actually wound up graduating as valedictorian of my class in 1989. That probably sounds impressive until you realize we only had about 25 students.

To be honest, I learned more about life from the football field, where the other kids and I could vent our frustrations by knocking the hell out of each other. One drill we used to run was called Walking Tackle, in which we practiced our form by tackling a ballcarrier who wasn’t allowed to run. It was brutal—and fun.

I was named all-conference my sophomore, junior, and senior years, and all-state as a junior and senior. But it was the freshman season that taught me the most. We were undefeated that season, and I got to play a lot, largely because the upper classes had so few students. The coaches needed every kid who was willing to suit up, and we had to play in any position where the team had a gap. I was just happy to get onto the field and would have done anything the coaches asked.

The state of Illinois had rules that a player’s number had to correspond to his position. (Linebackers were in the 50s, offensive linemen in the 70s, and so on.) As a freshman and sophomore, I played guard, tackle, fullback, and linebacker, so I often had to change jerseys, even on the sidelines during the game. We were a small team from a small school, going up against kids who were almost always better natural athletes than we were. So if we were going to achieve anything on the field, we all had to do what was best for the team, not simply what we wanted to do. Still hanging in the Mooseheart field house is a collage of photos from that season, with a bunch of uniform numbers next to my name corresponding to all the different positions I played—something I’m still proud of.

A lot of the values I learned on the football field are encapsulated in a set of expressions that we use around the office called Boomer-isms. (We refer to employees at KaBOOM! as “Boomers.”) These expressions used to be called Darell-isms, because they were things that I’d say again and again, in meetings or during individual conversations with employees. And over time they became part of our culture and our organizational DNA. They reflect where we’ve come from and how high we aim. And several of them date back to my childhood at Mooseheart.

One of them is “Practice doesn’t make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect.” This comes directly from my football coach at Mooseheart. He felt that players would sometimes go through the motions during the week and think they could get into a game and perform at a higher level. So he ended practice every day by making us run four perfect plays in a row. All the coaches were there, watching everything we did—all our footwork and technique—and if we didn’t do all four consecutive plays perfectly, we started over at the first one. Sometimes it was just an excuse to make us run wind sprints. But that lesson really sunk in—the idea that you don’t need more practice, you need better practice, and you need to train to exceed expectations over and over again. It’s not your all-time best performance that matters, it’s how you perform consistently, day in and day out.

At Mooseheart I learned the importance of looking out for other people. After all, that’s what the facility was doing for us. There were some grim family stories among the kids there. Many were literally
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