



Our History

The Barry Robinson Center traces its history to 1924 when Catholic and Norfolk businessman Frederick Robinson died, leaving a will stipulating the creation of a Catholic charitable trust that would “found, erect, and equip...a Home and School of Arts and Trades for Orphan Boys.” By the time suitable land was purchased and buildings were erected in 1933, the need for orphanages had diminished significantly, and The James Barry Robinson Home for Boys became primarily a small Catholic middle school. Although it was a Catholic school run by priests living on the grounds from 1933-1977, Mr. Robinson’s will expressly stated that “nothing herein contained shall be construed as preventing orphan boys of other faiths from entering the said Home and School.” Over the years the student body was a small but diverse group, consisting of boarders and day students, Catholics and non-Catholics. Most students came from Norfolk but some came from as far away as Roanoke, Virginia. The school served boys facing various challenges. Some of the boys were orphans. Some had lost a parent. Some boys’ families were experiencing financial or other difficulties. Some boys were simply not flourishing in their homes or schools, and it was thought they would benefit from a smaller, more structured school setting.

In the early years the school’s location was rural and contained a working farm on the grounds. A tenant farmer lived on the grounds and ran the farm, but the students had opportunities to learn about, and participate in, farm work. Even during the Depression there was abundant fresh food, and the students are reported to have eaten well.

In the early 1960s the 11th and 12th grades were added, and the school produced its first graduating class in 1962. The total high school enrollment peaked around 100 students and while relatively small, fielded strong football and basketball teams that for a time competed successfully with much bigger schools.

By the mid-1970s the school reached a point where to remain viable it needed to become substantially bigger and more of a traditional college preparatory school serving middle and upper middle class students. The Catholic charitable trust carefully assessed its options and instead decided to turn its attention and resources “to serve the special needs of boys who have experienced difficulty in performing in an acceptable manner in their schools and homes.” This new venture was named The James Barry-Robinson Institute. From 1977-1986, it served boys ages 12-18 who were experiencing emotional, behavioral, educational or social problems, and were in need of special services not currently being received in their schools and communities.

In 1986 the Catholic charitable Trust entered into a joint venture agreement with a local children’s hospital to expand the James Barry-Robinson Institute. The expanded residential treatment center was renamed The Barry Robinson Center. The three remaining beautiful, historic Colonial-style 1933 buildings were renovated and five new buildings (3 dormitories, a multi-use activities building with a regulation size gym, and a new cafeteria and infirmary) were added, allowing the new Center to provide services to girls and boys from ages 6 to 18 in a 72 bed setting.

When the 20 year joint venture agreement came to a natural and successful close in 2006, the Catholic charitable trust again became solely responsible for operating the Barry Robinson Center, which had grown into a behavioral health system for youth with a 72 bed psychiatric residential treatment facility, in-home counseling services, therapeutic foster care, independent living, and prevention services.

A decision was made to seek to re-establish a link to the Catholic heritage that had existed from 1933-1986. Returning to its roots as a faith-based organization was seen as a means of enhancing the behavioral healthcare services by directing services to the whole person, which includes psychological, physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions. The Center developed a set of Core Values to guide its actions and began developing ways to enhance its attention to clients' spiritual needs. In 2007, Bishop DiLorenzo, the Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Richmond, recognized The Barry Robinson Center as a private institution that is Catholic. In restoring its historic tie to the Catholic Church, the Center rejoins countless other faith-based behavioral health organizations across America with similar histories. While directing enhanced attention to its clients' spiritual needs, the Center's services will transcend denominational distinctions while respectfully bringing together staff members and clients of diverse faiths and backgrounds to accomplish the Center's mission of improving the lives of children.