Reflection on Dan Barry’s “The Boys in the Bunkhouse”

“The Boys in The Bunkhouse” was a book that I truly enjoyed reading. What I found so profound was the many emotions this nonfiction book made me feel. I was surprised that these events still happen today in our country. I was inspired by the social workers, reporters, and lawyers who had so much compassion and dedicated so much time and energy to these men who had this life of intense servitude.

I also felt pride knowing the author of this well-written book, Dan Barry, is an alumnus of St. Bonaventure University. Knowing what just one alumnus has accomplished to expose an unfortunate situation such as this, encourages me to believe that my education at St. Bonaventure is limitless and this makes me very excited. I learned about Franciscan values from (former university president) Sister
Margaret Carney when I visited St. Bonaventure. The outstanding individuals throughout this thought-provoking story showed all of the Franciscan values, especially individual dignity, community inclusiveness, and service to others.

All humans are born with the Franciscan value of individual dignity. The men in this story who were sent to work at Henry’s Turkey Service had self-worth when they started working, but over time the dignity as individual humans got striped from them as they were turned into nothing but cheap labor. Through the reduction in money and changes in management their lives turned close to slavery.

The men worked extremely long hours, were punished for incorrect work, and lived in extremely harsh environments filled with mold, cockroaches, and urine. They didn’t even receive proper medical attention. An example is when one individual, Levi, had a broken kneecap and was told to keep working. The men lost their dignity and self-respect because no one treated them with respect at Henry’s. The lack of dignity kept the men from complaining and even the people of Atalissa didn’t realize the extent to which the abuse was happening.

Many caring individuals restored what over 30 years of working on the turkey farm had done to the men. People like Denise Gonzales from the Department of Human Services who had a social worker assigned to each of the men and worked with
them to uncover the men’s physical and psychological issues. And people like Sherri Brown and investigative reporter Clark Kaufman, who dedicated their time to realize there was something wrong and that these men were being treated more like machines than humans. These people, through small acts, worked to restore these “boys at heart” to have their own individual dignity and integrity.

The Franciscans’ idea of community inclusiveness was absent and prevalent in various times throughout these men’s lives. The boys were their own community. They treated each other similarly as they all had a lot in common and were each other’s family. In the small town of Atalissa the people treated them as one of their own for the most part. The men were included every Sunday at church, in the town’s celebrations and parades, shopping at the mini-mart, and patronizing the town bar with other residents of the town. The women of the town, “The ABC’s,” made items such as blankets for the men at Christmas. Even though the reporters and many people criticized the members of the town for never reporting the harsh lives the men were living, most were not aware of the reality of their work lives. When this situation became exposed, eventually these men were liberated and became community members of the world we live in through the help of social workers, the Exceptional Persons Inc. group, and the work of many people who wanted to include them in their community. Unfortunate situations such as this can occur. Everyone knows people
whose lives seem fine on the surface, but we don’t know the whole story of their past or home life.

The very important Franciscan value of service to others is displayed by so many throughout this inspirational story. The men in this story lead a life of servitude but the people who freed them would be considered individuals who lead a life of service. Denise Gonzales is someone who dedicated so much of her time and life to help everyone, especially the boys. She won their trust, became both their friend and a mother figure to them. The countless other social workers, the individuals from Exceptional Persons Inc., and people like Neal McGlaughlin had empathy for the boys and worked endless hours when they were liberated to make sure they were comfortable. A lawyer, Robert Canino, put so much passion into seeking justice for these men who had never had anyone defend them in the past. All of these caring people who changed these men’s lives from servitude to freedom are an inspiration. We all should strive to exemplify this compassion and drive to make the world a better place.