

BIG OAK RANCH, NORTH ALABAMA

# A family, four promises, a future

BY RANDALL MURPHREE

*Editor's note:* This article is based on interviews with Big Oak Ranch directors John David Phillips and Noel Vice, and an address by Big Oak founder John Croyle at a Brandon, Mississippi, church.

Nineteen-year-old John Croyle didn't have a clue what he was in for when he went to be a counselor at King's Arrow Ranch in South Mississippi in the early 1970s.

"I found out what I was put on earth to do," he says. "That summer, Freddy (name is changed), a little boy from New Orleans told me how he helped his mother make money." Freddy would answer when a man knocked on the front door, take the man's money, tell his mother, "Mama, the next one's here, and I got his money," then lead him to Mom's bedroom.

John was a football standout at University of Alabama (UA) with plans to play pro ball. But that all changed when John met Freddy and resolved to spend the rest of his life rescuing boys like him. Upon graduation, John faced a fork in the road – football or Freddy? Freddy won out and John took the road to Big Oak.

He founded Big Oak Boys' Ranch, "A Christian home for kids who need a chance," on a 143-acre tract near Gadsden, Alabama, in 1974. He already had five boys placed with him when he married Tee in 1975. They opened Big Oak Girls' Ranch 40 miles away in Springville in 1989.

## Four promises

At any given time, about 40 girls and 60 boys call Big Oak home. Each 5,500-square-foot house is home to house parents and a maximum of eight children. From the beginning, John determined that the ranches would provide a family

setting. A place where kids have a father and a mother, four promises from John himself, and hope for a future.

"The Bible is very clear," John says. "It says take care of the widows and the orphans. Every child that ever comes to live with us, I sit down and tell them, 'I will make you four promises: I love you, I'll never lie to you, I'll stick with you until you're grown and there are boundaries.'"

To date, John and his wife Tee have raised about 1,600 boys and girls. Of course, they have a lot of help – ranch directors Noel Vice and John David Phil-

house parents commit to a number of basic guidelines, but are also free to work out a lot of the details for their family.

"I'm of the old school – 'yes sir, no sir, yes ma'am, no ma'am,'" John says. "Our boys won't sit around the kitchen table until their housemother is seated, and they'll pull the chair out for her."

House parents agree to cultivate the same values and respect for others that John expects. They agree to take their whole house to church each week. They're free to choose what church, but it's a mandate. They treat ranch children

just as they treat their own. They establish house rules, set curfews, assign chores, and plan family activities as they determine appropriate for their household.

In the summers, the ranches are able to employ a limited number of their own kids, rewarding those who have shown the most maturity and dependability with work on the ranches. Unlike many group homes, Big Oak sees their kids through college if they so desire. A transition home provides apartments for college commuters

and a home base for those who stay on the university campus. This year, Big Oak had 14 students in college.

## First, the boys

As a teenager, Noel's family and the Croyles attended the same church. At school, some of Noel's best friends were from Big Oak, so he knew the ranch well. After seven years in vocational ministry, the Lord began to stir in his heart a feeling that he might one day work at the ranch.

"They called me a week or two later," he says, "and wanted to meet with my wife Renee and me. John invited us to come and be house parents." Noel was immediately excited about the prospect, but was cautious because he was only 26



John and Tee Croyle

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lips, 16 pairs of house parents, and committed support staffs.

The oak tree image comes from Isaiah 61:3: "So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified" (NASB).

Kids who come to the ranch are orphaned, abused, neglected or homeless, or some combination of those four misfortunes. Most are referred and brought by parents or family who can't – or choose not to – care for them. From the start, the ranch moms and dads begin sowing Big Oak seeds of trust and love in the shattered young lives.

Noel Vice, director of the boys' ranch, says it could run without him, but house parents are the key to success. Big Oak



John David Phillips and residents of the Girls' Ranch

and Renee was 25.

He was thinking, "As much as I would love it, this may not be her calling." But as soon as they got in the car after the interview, she told him, "Now I know why I haven't been given a peace about any of my job interviews. I really believe this is what God has designed us to do as a family." Four months later Noel was named ranch director.

"There were a lot of staff here old enough to be my parents," Noel says, "but we prayed about it. I felt so inadequate, but I also know that when God has called us to do something He equips us."

Noel cites one major, telltale difference between a Christian home like Big Oak and a similar secular home. The average period of service for house parents in a secular home is less than one year.

"Some of our house parents stay as long as seven years," he says. He believes that difference is a reflection of Big Oak's Christian foundation and the fact that house parents there feel called to this ministry. Still, it's not an easy road.

"When a child has been through what some of our children have been through, they don't readily accept our love, they don't understand our motives," Noel says. "They ask questions. They say, 'I don't want you to love me.'"

When the discipline and structure

get to be too much, they lash out at the house parents, no matter how much the mom and dad have sacrificed for them. In those tough times, the house parents rely on the Lord for their strength.

#### Finally, the girls

John David Phillips tells how Shelley Drive, the entry street at the girls' ranch, was named. Shelley was a 12-year-old whom John and Tee learned about in the mid-1980s. Sexually molested and beaten by her parents, Shelley was before a judge who would determine her future. The judge refused to give the Croyles custody to keep Shelley in their own home.

"If you don't take Shelley away from those parents, she'll be dead within six months," John told the judge. The judge left the child with her abusive parents and she died a few weeks later. John and Tee knew then that they had to build a home for girls.

John David was eight years old when his dad interrupted Saturday morning cartoons to tell him they were going to hear John Croyle speak at a men's group in a nearby church. Later, as a teenager, John David went with his church volunteers to build fences on the boys' ranch. Still later, like John, he played football at UA, graduating in 1998.

Now, John David has an even stronger

tie to John Croyle than fences and football. He's married to John's daughter Reagan, who played basketball at UA, and he's dad to the Croyles' two grandsons. Just to carry on the family tradition, Brodie, John's son, was also a UA star and now plays for the Kansas City Chiefs.

John David laughs today recalling a conversation he had with Reagan early in their marriage. After working a few years as a stockbroker and pharmaceutical rep, he began to feel a call toward ministry, but he had some pretty definite ideas of his own.

"I would never work for your dad in a million years," he told Reagan. He was just as confident that he would never

work with girls. They began praying for direction and said nothing to her parents.

Four months later, John called to ask them to join the ranch staff. When the time came, John David and Reagan were certain of their call. She worked on staff as counseling director until their first son was born.

John David gives a great tour of the 325-acre ranch. He stops by a huge barn and explains, "The man who gave us the horses asked where we were going to keep them. We didn't have a barn, so he built us a barn."

Of the horses, John David says, "I know there are a lot of psychological studies, but we don't do horse therapy. We just ride horses. Take a little girl who's been raped, who's been beaten, who's never had control over anything in her life. It's fun to watch her get up on that thousand-pound animal and develop confidence as she learns she can control it."

John David and Noel are both confident of their call and committed to their cause. Like John Croyle, they are men of deep passion and a sense of pride in their ministry, yet they are men humble enough to realize the results are up to God.

"It's not our job to change lives," Noel says. "It's our job to be changed lives for the Lord and let Him use us as tools to change the lives of children we work with." 