



Cunningham Children's Home: History At-A-Glance

On January 31, 1895, Joseph and Mary Cunningham deeded their home and 15 acres to the women of the Methodist Episcopal Church for a Deaconess Home and Orphanage. In the beginning Cunningham Home had two missions. The first was to help dependent children and the second was to provide a Deaconess Home in the Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. By 1910, there was no longer a need for a deaconess home. The sole mission of the home became meeting the needs of dependent children, a new, separate corporation was formed in 1921 and the name was changed to Cunningham Children's Home, Inc. of Urbana, Illinois.

There are three constants in the history of Cunningham Children's Home:

- 1) children and families in need,
- 2) United Methodist Women as keepers of the trust, and
- 3) changing and increasing demands on resources.

1) The Beginning

1894-1910

The Women's Home Missionary Society (WHMS) accepts the Cunningham home and the challenge to help dependent children by establishing the Cunningham Deaconess Home and Orphanage. Most of the children served by the Home are orphans, half-orphans and those whose families cannot provide for their children within the family setting. The Board of Managers adds a large dormitory, nursery, kindergarten and schoolroom, a boys' dormitory and a hospital room to the original home.

2) Narrowing the Focus

1910-1925

The Board of Managers changes the name of the home to Cunningham Children's Home, becomes incorporated to accept gifts and bequests and makes it solely an orphanage. Sheldon Hall was built as a school building and a medical isolation ward in 1911. Over the years Sheldon Hall housed the nursery, boys' and girls' dormitories and administrative offices. The devastating influenza epidemic of 1918 emphasized the need for a campus infirmary, and Illinois Hall was built in 1921 with an infirmary on the first floor and a girls' dormitory on the second floor.

3) The Depression Era

1925-1933

University of Illinois Professor, James White prepares an architectural study to develop the Home of the future. White's plan included remodeling Sheldon Hall into a dining room and kitchen with a dormitory on the 2nd floor, building a new main dormitory, a hospital annex, a recreation hall and a central heating plant.

In 1927 building begins with the construction of the central heating plant. The Great Depression impacts the building plans and the board structure. Out of necessity, the Board of Managers becomes a "local board." The building plans are put on hold and Cunningham Children's Home comes out of the Depression free of debt and with an adequate reserve.

4) The Changing Child Care Environment

1933-1948

Cunningham Children's Home recovers from the Depression and revisits its building plans. The original building and its additions have severe structural damage due to termite infestation. In 1936, the 1899 addition to the original home is closed and the construction of Spalding Hall is approved. The original Cunningham Hall is razed in 1938. Rachel Ann Cottage is replaced in 1939. In 1945, Cunningham celebrates its 50th anniversary and receives special permission from the War Production Board to build the administration building.

In 1940, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church-South and the Methodist Protestant Church were unified in a single Methodist Church and the WHMS is now known as the Women's Society of Christian Service (WSCS).

As in the past, children are still brought to the Home by their families, but an increasing number are being referred by probation officers and other government officials. The child welfare practices in Illinois are changing rapidly with more children entering Cunningham with dependency decrees.

5) Re-imagining the Future

1949-1960

The transformation of Cunningham Children's Home from an orphanage into a residential treatment center begins with the Board's hiring of Sarah English as superintendent. Mrs. English challenges the Board to learn more about the developmental needs of children living at Cunningham and to hire social workers to work with them. In December 1960, Ed Odom, became Superintendent of Cunningham Children's Home. Ed, who held a Master's of Science in Social Work, was grounded in both the Methodist social welfare traditions and professional social work.

Whereas the building program of the 1930's and 40's concentrated on maintaining congregate, communal living, this period represents a shift in childcare practices to a more family-like environment. Beginning in 1954 and ending in 1970 four cottages are added to the Cunningham campus.

6) A New Era Dawns

1961-1976

The Board works to make Cunningham Children's Home a professional social service agency. In 1966 the cabin at Lake Mattoon is purchased and in 1967 the first community group home is established for boys. Sheldon Hall is razed and in 1969, the girls' community group home is opened. In 1975 the Odom Recreation Center is built.

In 1968 the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merge to become the United Methodist Church and in 1972 the WSCS becomes the United Methodist Women.

By the close of this period with its social work and therapeutic focus, Cunningham meets the Child Welfare League of America definition of a residential treatment center.

7) A Residential Treatment Center

1976-1988

Cunningham Children's Home completes the transition and is firmly established by a future-oriented, flexible Board of Directors as a residential treatment center for youth who have come out of abusive and neglectful situations. Tom Powell, a former resident of the Home, is hired as Executive Director.

The United Methodist Women continue to be future-oriented and in 1982 built the Gerber On-Grounds School to meet the ever-changing educational needs of the children.

8) The Legacy Continues

1988-1999

In 1988 Samuel Banks is appointed Executive Director. Cunningham has now matured into a highly respected, professional residential treatment center caring for and providing professional services for children and youth who have been abused and neglected.

In 1989 the Goodman Diagnostic Center is built, in 1993 the Lake Mattoon cabin is razed and rebuilt, in 1995 the Kendall Gill Community Boys Group Home was opened on the corner of Washington and Vine replacing the previous home and in 1996 the Board of Directors purchases 17.4 contiguous acres of land to the north of the Cunningham's main campus increasing its area to just over 32 acres.

In 1996 the Central Illinois Conference and the Southern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church merge to form the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference. The women of the church also merge once again expanding the base of church women committed to the mission and ministry of Cunningham Children's Home.

In 1996 the Illinois Great Rivers Conference UMW units approve the Board's request to purchase the 17 acres of land immediate north and adjacent to the existing main campus.

A group of Board members formed the Guardian Parent giving program in 1997 to help provide Cunningham kids with a steady, predictable stream of support through recurring gifts. Their sustaining gifts will go a long way toward filling the gap between the true costs of care and the reimbursements we receive from referring agencies.

In keeping with its commitment to meet the ever-changing and challenging needs of the youth in Cunningham's care, the board of directors approves the creation and implementation of a Treatment Foster Care Program in 1997 and the CIRCLE Day Treatment School in 1998.

9) Keeping the Promise in the New Millennium

2000-2007

In the year 2000, Cunningham Children's Home begins to undertake a radical transformation of our main campus and beyond. Over the course of many years, declines in funding for social services in the state mean that only the most damaged and seriously troubled youth are placed in residential treatment settings. To be approved for residential care, children must present significant risk behaviors such as frequent physical aggression, running away, sexual behavior problems and/or serious psychiatric symptoms that prevent them from being safely managed in a foster home or other community setting.

As a result of these trends, Cunningham now cares for severely emotionally disordered children and youth who sometimes exhibit violent and self-harming behaviors, and who also have exceptional educational needs. The Cunningham 2000 Committee (including Board, staff, and architectural professionals) begins the

process of study and development of a Master Campus Plan—a total campus facilities plan to meet the kids' changing needs. These changes challenge the Board of Directors to stretch Cunningham's resources once again.

In 2001 the board establishes the Cunningham Children's Home Foundation to support the mission and ministry of Cunningham. The Foundation is charged with providing charitable support to meet the annual operating needs of the agency, provides charitable support to meet the major capital needs of the agency, and provides management and leadership to maximize the performance and growth of the Cunningham Children's Home Endowment assets and funds.

As the Cunningham 2000 Committee continues its research and planning work throughout 2001-2002, the Board establishes The Phase I Design and Construction Committee to solidify plans for a new Residential Treatment Center. In 2003, the committee gives final approval for the new building's planned construction on the 17-acre area at the north end of campus. When ground is broken on the project in March 2004, the Cunningham Master Campus Plan begins to be realized. In 2005, the history of giving quilts to those who have come to Cunningham led to the organized, now annual, signature event to raise awareness and funds for Cunningham. The first "Festival of Quilts" was held at Lincoln Square in Urbana.

In 2005, 30 of our youth moved into a new 23,700 square foot Residential Treatment Center. This facility was a major step forward in creating a safer and more effective treatment environment for our youth. The Center includes three self-contained residential cottages, connected to a clinical and health services wing which houses the offices of our therapists, nurses, and supervisory staff.

The safety improvements are enormous and have made a measurable impact both by reducing dangerous situations for our kids, and by giving our staff improved tools on which to focus their attention, the therapeutic needs of each client. At the same time, the building was designed to preserve our children's emotional safety and feeling of home. While more clinical in appearance than the older cottages, the new living environments included attractive design features and abundant natural light. As always, every child is given their own hand-made bed quilt, stitched with love by the United Methodist Women who have been caretakers of the home since 1895.

In 2007, we opened the doors of our Spiritual Life Center, which serves as a resource for spiritual and emotional healing as well as providing a community center where graduations, school plays, and other Cunningham celebrations can take place. The Spiritual Life Center contains a chapel, a meditation room, our chaplain's office, and several meeting rooms and offices. It's a beautiful building where everyday miracles can and do take place.

As fundraising to pay for the cost of these two new facilities continues, Cunningham turns our attention to the educational, vocational and therapeutic recreation needs of our kids and embarking on Phase II of our project—creating a new Education and Recreation Complex. In 2007, a major new initiative of the Lighting the Way Capital Campaign was launched, "Coach's Campaign," chaired by former Illini Basketball Coach Lou Henson and his wife Mary, and former Illini and NBA Player Kendall Gill and his wife Wendy. Coach's Campaign aims to provide a base of support for the new Education and Recreation Complex, beginning with raising \$2 million towards a new Special Therapies Center and \$7 million towards the cost of two new schools.

Drawing on best practice models for special education and therapeutic recreation, the proposed complex will include our residential school, our day school, and a shared cafeteria/dining hall and shared recreation and activity center.

Also, in 2007, the Girls Group Home returned to Cunningham's main campus and the Transitional Living House moves into the former Girls Group Home residence reflecting the ongoing need to continue to shift Cunningham's resources and adapt our facilities to better meet our young people's needs.

10) Changing Leadership, Continuing the Mission

2008-2014

In January 2008, Sam Banks accepted a position in the Chicago area, leaving the agency after 25 years of distinguished service to the children and youth of Cunningham. After a nearly nine-month search, the Board of Directors chose Marlin Livingston as the agency's new President and CEO.

Having previously served as Executive Director of the Florida Region for Kids Hope United since 2002, Marlin had overseen the public to private transition of foster care services for over 3,000 children. His previous experience included frontline and administrative roles in residential care and hospital settings, including serving as a therapist and Cottage Director at Cunningham in the 1990's.

In 2009, Cunningham continued to respond to the changing needs of the youth in our care, opening expanded transitional living services within an existing apartment complex in Urbana. In addition to the existing Transitional Living House, three young women and three young men can now be provided with an intermediate level of supervision and support as they prepare to make it on their own and transition to full independence.

The rapidly changing child welfare climate was the driving force behind Cunningham's management team and an ad hoc committee of the Board of Directors' journey to revise the agency strategic plan in February 2014. The updated strategic priorities were developed based on the revised vision, mission, and core values. Our vision is straightforward. We want to see every child thrive. And our mission builds on that idea by stating that we want to nourish hope through effective solutions so children thrive and families flourish. Our core values of spirituality, teamwork, integrity, and respect ground our work and bind us together.

In May 2014, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) indicated a great need for foster care homes, so Cunningham responded by expanding its traditional Foster Care program. The number of children and families served tripled in three months as Cunningham hired new staff and recruited new foster parents to give more kids care and stable homes.

In August of the same year, Cunningham opened CIRCLE Academy-Vermilion located in Rossville, Illinois. The program is based on the model used at CIRCLE Academy Day School on Cunningham's campus and provides individualized educational and behavioral plans for all students to address their needs. Cunningham made the decision to open the school after talking with school officials in Vermilion County about a need to broaden the continuum of special education services for their students.

11) Expanding our Services into the Community

2015-2019

In 2015, the Board approved the decision to merge Cunningham Children's Home Foundation back into the agency and began implementing plans to meet the outlined strategic goals of the updated three-year (2015-2018) strategic plan.

The seven strategic goals include establishing strategies to ensure that staff, facilities, programs, and fiscal management promote excellence and long-term viability of the organization; developing advanced competencies in the area of trauma-informed care; developing competencies that engage children, youth, and families in creating healthy solutions; developing a broader spectrum of services for children, youth, and families; building an Education and Recreation Center to enhance the quality and safety of our services; continuing to enhance governance by improving communication, expanding educational opportunities, and broadening board diversity; and evaluating Cunningham's brand and its impact on new funding and service opportunities.

In January 2016, Cunningham's years of experience helping kids, from our therapeutic schools, transition to adulthood expanded into the community with the addition of the Vocational Options Program (Options) which works with youth and adults, ages 6-40, with emotional, behavioral and mental health challenges. The Options staff helps these individuals become self-sufficient through training, support, and real-world experiences. Services are developed around an individual's understanding of their skills, accommodations, and disability while providing workplace experience. Individuals are referred to Cunningham from public schools and social service agencies throughout East Central Illinois. Grants through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WOIA) and the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) provide funding for the program.

In February 2016, the Cunningham Board renewed its efforts to raise \$8.5 million for the Education and Recreation Center (ERC). The total cost of the project was \$12.9 million.

In September 2016, Cunningham began offering its counseling expertise directly to individuals—mainly youth and families—in the community who are experiencing difficult life situations. HopeSprings Counseling Services opened its doors in mid-September 2016, serving nearly 75 clients through the first six months. The counselors at HopeSprings have diverse training and certifications in a multitude of areas and address these issues by offering trauma-informed care through individual, family and group sessions in office or home.

In August 2017, the official groundbreaking for the ERC took place with nearly 200 donors, staff, community leaders, board members, committee members, and students in attendance. Construction on the state-of-the-art facility began shortly thereafter.

Our agency continued to expand opportunities to care for youth and families in our community in 2018 with the addition of two new programs—Intensive Placement Stabilization (IPS) and Empowering Connections through Hope and Opportunities (ECHO). IPS provides short-term services, interventions and support to children and youth with emotional and/or behavioral problems who are identified as being at risk of being removed from their current homes. ECHO works with Champaign County citizens who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Our staff guides adults or families to resources that provide support towards permanent housing, employment and life skills so that they can live independently with or without on-going support.

In January and February 2019, our CIRCLE (day school) and Gerber (residential) students began to occupy the ERC. The structure, designed to meet the special needs of Cunningham kids, provides ample space for

both academic and therapeutic activities and includes our residential and day schools, the gymnasium, a cafeteria and music and art therapy rooms. Dedicated that March, the building was named the Rosann Gelvin Noel Education Center (NEC) and Coach Lou and Mary Henson Gymnasium (Henson Gymnasium) in honor and memory of wonderful supporters. From the beginning, Richard and Rosann Gelvin Noel believed in Cunningham's dream to offer our kids a learning environment that suits their unique academic and behavioral needs and the Noel family chose to remember and honor Rosann, a compassionate friend and strong advocate for our students, in this way. The Hensons' passion for this project came from their first visit to the gym at Cunningham in 2007. Soon after, they kicked off the Coach's campaign with former Illini great Kendall Gill and his wife Wendy. Over many years, the Hensons and Gills held an unfaltering belief in the need for the best recreational and learning environment for our students. Cunningham recognized the Hensons for their loving support for our kids with the naming of the gymnasium in their honor and recognized Kendall Gill for his 30 years of support and efforts in raising thousands of dollars for our kids with the naming of Kendall Gill Court.

In Fiscal Year 19 (July 1, 2018-June 30, 2019), Cunningham experienced a 40 percent growth in the number of those we served, bringing hope and healing to 731 youth, adults and families. Recognizing the need to provide services to runaway youth in our community, we started Runaway and Homeless Youth Services (RHY) in July 2019. RHY works with Champaign County individuals who are at risk of being homeless. Services include Emergency Shelter (for ages 14 up to 21) providing safe and stable temporary housing; Street Outreach (for ages 14 up to 24) striving to ensure a safe, stable living arrangement; and Intermediate Transitional Living (for ages 18 up to 24) focusing on development and lifelong skills that produce sustainable housing, employment, relationships, and linkages to community resources.

12) New Strategic Plan for Meeting Needs Now and in the Future

2020-present

The rapidly changing child welfare climate and significant growth the agency experienced in recent years were factors in the decision to review the existing plan and develop new strategic goals. Cunningham's core values ground our work, bind us together, and define our collective character. The new strategic goals address how we will grow to meet current and future needs of youth, adults, families and our communities.

In January 2020, to help struggling families, our Community Services added Families Stronger Together (FST), a program that provides voluntary, trauma-informed and culturally responsive therapeutic services for the entire family—caregivers and their youth—who have entered or are at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. Shortly thereafter, the COVID-19 global pandemic struck, and our campus went on lockdown. Treating the threat of COVID-19 seriously, Cunningham leadership used thoughtful resolve and preparedness but not panic. Our clinical and operational teams actively worked through all situations that came with each new day.

The paths that lead youth to Cunningham Children's Home are all different. Our job as a child welfare provider is to provide a safe environment and to be caring, stable adults in the lives of these young people while they are with us. In alignment with our vision to see every child thrive, Cunningham was awarded the Caminos grant in the spring of 2020 and began delivering services in 2021 to a new population of children who need help. The Caminos program provides safe secure placement options for children who have

recently migrated to the United States and are seeking opportunities for reunification with family as well as the chance to pursue their legal immigration case.

Cunningham experienced a year filled with uncertainties and many moving parts in 2021; yet, it was also a year of growth and achievement for our agency. Despite the challenges that came with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and workforce crisis, our amazing staff—352 full-time employees, 103 different positions across 13 different programs—continued to persevere and did a remarkable job of anticipating and meeting the critical needs of the youth and families we served. The year 2022 saw its only set of concerns with inflation, unemployment, the housing crisis and a possible recession yet Cunningham's committed staff and supporters continued to steer the ship. In March 2022, United Methodist Women became known as United Women in Faith with new and improved programs to nurture current members and welcome new women to join to put their love in action on behalf of women, children and youth.

In August 2023, after months of planning, fundraising, remodeling, and barista training, **Ms. Bonnie's Cup of Hope** opened its doors in the Rachel Ann Cottage. The coffee shop, created for staff and their guests, became a reality through the generosity of Vic and Bonnie Buraglio and nearly 90 additional supporters, including longtime donors, United Women in Faith, churches, organizations, and Cunningham staff. Operated by students in the Options Program, the shop provides valuable experience in small business operations, financial literacy, and customer service.

In June 2024, Cunningham expanded its continuum of care with the opening of the **Cedars Youth Shelter (Cedars)**. Responding to the increasing demand for safe and supportive environments for children and teens across Illinois, Cedars offers a secure and nurturing setting for displaced youth within the DCFS system. Located on Cunningham's main Urbana campus, the shelter provides temporary housing, support services, medical assessments, and individualized therapy designed to meet each youth's unique needs.

With continued leadership of the United Women in Faith, Cunningham continues to hold ourselves to the highest possible standards in meeting the needs of those we serve and remain committed to our mission to nourish hope through effective solutions so children thrive and families' flourish.