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An Non-Exclusive Interview With Author Lawson McDowell  
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## **Charles Manson and a Sixty-Three Year Old Boys Town Mystery**

Question: Your new book, *Before He Became A Monster*, was released in 2013. Tell me a little about it.

Lawson McDowell: It is an historical fiction work about Charles Manson's time at Boys Town. The story is set twenty years before the Tate-LaBianca murders, during his stay at Father Flanagan's world-respected facility.

Question: What year would that have put Manson in Omaha?

Lawson McDowell: Manson arrived at Boys Town in 1949, after begging Indianapolis priests and authorities for a chance to succeed in life. He had just turned 14 years old and was a kid who experienced a childhood no one should endure.

Question: It sounds like he wanted to do well.

Lawson McDowell: When you study the written accounts of his assignment to Boys Town, you get the impression of a young man brimming with hope for the future. His optimism shined through in newspaper articles and photographs of the time. Sixty years later, his positive feelings about Boy Town surfaced whenever we spoke about his experiences there.

Question: So, what went wrong at Boys Town?

Lawson McDowell: Ah. No spoilers today. (He laughs). You have to read the book for that answer.

Question: I suspect few people realize Charles Manson was at Boys Town. How did you become aware of it?

Lawson McDowell: Several years ago, one of my friends worked at Boys Town. Over dinner one night, he mentioned Charles Manson was a student.

The mention of Manson's name sent chills down my spine. I wasn't even sure if Manson was still alive, and not sure I wanted to know.

I was surprised he had been at Boys Town, so I decided to investigate.

Question: It must have been difficult to investigate events from so long ago.

Lawson McDowell: My initial research only deepened the mystery. After three months, my intuition told me there was probably a good story in Manson's hasty flight from Boy's Town. I dug deeper, eventually talking directly to Manson about it.

Question: How did your investigation lead to a book about one of America's most feared killers?

Lawson McDowell: When I realized Manson fell from a point far below society's safety nets, I knew I wanted to share his story from a different angle—a perspective outside the dominant paradigms.

Question: Where is Charles Manson now?

Lawson McDowell: He is locked away in Corcoran State Prison, about fifty miles from Fresno. He's in a special cell block with other celebrity prisoners.

Question: Give me an example about the people he might interact with.

Lawson McDowell: Manson is confined with several well-known criminals. Juan Corona, who murdered 25 migrant workers, is there. The parent killing Menendez twins are there. Even Sirhan B. Sirhan, who assassinated Robert Kennedy, was in Manson's cell block for a time. There are also assorted drug lords and white collar felons who need protection. (Lawson chuckles and adds) I'll bet they must have very interesting Monopoly games.

Question: I have to ask, why should anyone care that Manson was at Boys Town?

Lawson McDowell: Manson is a figure who made a profound impact on American culture. More importantly, he is still relevant in our society, not because we think he will order more murders, but because his ideas still attract today's youth. He receives more mail than any

prisoner in American history. It seems his counter-culture ideas gain popularity every year. Beyond all that, Manson's time in Boys Town is a good story.

Question: How long was he at Boys Town?

Lawson McDowell: There are different opinions on that point. Boys Town said Manson was there five days. Other sources say it was three. When I asked Manson, he said he didn't know for sure. We do know, however, that he wasn't there long. He fled for reasons never fully explained. It was a mystery that intrigued me. The things that happened at Boys Town changed the course of history in a darker direction for Manson.

Question: From Boys Town's perspective, I imagine it was unnerving to have a writer asking about relationships with Charles Manson. Was Boys Town helpful?

Lawson McDowell: The short answer is: yes. Keep in mind that the staff at Boys Town is built around caring, professionals focused on helping people. They are good people with a noble mission. When they saw I was not out to harm them or their great institution, most were very cooperative. A couple of people were suspicious, but that's understandable. On balance, I was very impressed with Boys Town.

Question: Were you able to review Manson's files?

Lawson McDowell: No. The Boys Town lawyers advised against opening files to an independent author. I respect that decision. Boys Town told me informally there isn't a lot in his files anyway. When you think about his short time there, they couldn't have much information.

Question: Then what was your main objective at Boys Town?

Lawson McDowell: I wanted to get a feel for the Boys Town culture during their great construction period. When Manson arrived in 1949, the campus was transitioning from dormitories to home-like environments. At the same time, they were erecting huge buildings that in some cases outsized major public works.

Question: You said earlier, that you engaged in conversation with Manson about Boys Town. That must have been interesting.

Lawson McDowell: It was. I started writing him in 2009, but we didn't talk until 2010. It took almost a year to navigate the prison rules and Manson Family members who try to protect his interests.

Question: Are you saying that the Manson Family is still around?

Lawson McDowell: Oh yes. They're still out there, and they're very loyal to him. It's not just the old followers. He has a new generation of supporters,

probably numbering in the thousands, I am told. Several live right outside the prison. Others are scattered across the country and world.

Question: Why did the Manson Family get involved before you could talk to him?

Lawson McDowell: Manson gets hundreds of requests for interviews and advice, and while he's relatively available to people, he has to ignore almost every request because of the numbers. His followers help him sort things out.

Question: Why do you think he decided to talk with you?

Lawson McDowell: He saw I am a railroad man. His relatives in Kentucky were railroad people on the C&O. Manson reminisced about walking to the rail yards as a child to see the trains and watch his uncles switch coal cars. He was surprisingly knowledgeable about railroad operations.

Question: Did you have any big surprises from your discussions?

Lawson McDowell: I did. The biggest surprise came early on when I realized how reasoned and reflective Manson is. Going in, I expected an unbalanced personality. I was wrong on that point. The "crazy man" impression he projects for main stream media is something he cultivates.

Question: So he didn't seem unbalanced to you?

Lawson McDowell: No. I saw defensiveness when he thought I was trying to judge him, but nothing inexplicable or strange.

I believe his antics for the media are a control tactic, stemming from a desire to mislead reporters who try to incite him on camera. Manson believes his real trial was in the media, not the courthouse. He's still bitter that President Nixon declared him guilty while the trial was still underway.

Question: Are you saying there is a question about his guilt?

Lawson McDowell: Perhaps, but to me, the bigger question is the fairness of the trial. We live in a nation where the rule of law is so important that we set people free if there is any reasonable doubt of guilt. Yet in Manson's case, we had a suspect who was denied his own witnesses, denied the right to cross examine, and faced a single eye witness against him, a girl who had been part of the actual murder party. That witness, Linda Kasabian, struck a deal to save herself after police arrested her in New Hampshire and dragged her back to Los Angeles in chains. She had been in such a panic to run that she abandoned her baby with the Manson family.

Question: So, why was so much effort expended to convict him?

Lawson McDowell: In the 1960's, it was unthinkable that high school football stars, homecoming queens and kids from good families could commit such horrific murders on their own. It was easy to think there must have been some other reason, and that reason, according to the prosecutor, was Charles Manson's mind control. It was the same sort of intransigent thinking that doomed Socrates who was sentenced to death for corrupting the minds of youth. America needed a demon to explain these unthinkable murders. Manson was the answer.

Question: How did conversations go between you and Manson?

Lawson McDowell: We had to work at being congenial. At first conversations were difficult. I had to suppress my own biases against Manson, while he seemed to struggle at times also.

Question: Why so?

Lawson McDowell: He was interested in talking, but I have a fundamental distrust for outsiders. I found it difficult to understand him at times. He tends to speak in metaphors and from the perspectives of others. His frames of reference are totally different than most people's. He never had the parental or social exposure we grew up with. He seemed cautious and fearful.

Question: What do you mean when you say he was fearful?

Lawson McDowell: He is constantly worried about people trying to harm him. I would say that's a legitimate concern, based on what we discussed. There are plenty of killers in prison who would bask in the notoriety of killing a celebrity like Manson.

I found his view of the world different in other ways. For example, he can't relate easily to people with normal lives...people who stress about paying bills or missing work to take care of sick kids. His views tend to be more polarized than a normal person's.

Question: I understand Manson still says he is innocent.

Lawson McDowell: He's been consistent about that since the start. Most people think he was convicted of murder, but that's not correct. Committing murder was never the question. He was convicted of *conspiracy* to commit murder.

Question: It sounds like your talks were friendly?

Lawson McDowell: No, not all the time. We had some remarkable screaming cuss fights, particularly when I asked my own probing questions about the Tate-LaBianca murders. He was also offended that I asked about his mother. He loves her dearly, although most accounts describe her as an uncaring, alcoholic prostitute.

Question: Does he ever talk about getting out of prison.

Lawson McDowell: No. He knows he'll die in prison. He's where he needs to be. Beyond the Tate-LaBiacca murders, Manson is the first person to tell you he's not a good guy. "I've done a lot of bad things in my life. I'm an outlaw, but I never ordered anyone killed," he said. And he doesn't really want out. "You have too many crazy people out there. I'm safer where I am," he says.

Question: Any final comments?

Lawson McDowell: I'm confident readers will find Before He Became A Monster entertaining and upbeat with little gore while suggesting what might have gone terribly wrong at Boys Town. For me the book was a mind-opening project that left me wondering: Has America's demon been telling the truth all along?

### **Additional comments by the author**

"After forty-plus years, people are still fascinated about Charles Manson and his reputed control over people—his powers to require people to do his killing."

"Before He Became A Monster straddles the lines between history, crime fiction, and social commentary."

"To me, the book's style is in the vein of King's The Body, with a dash of Flagg's Fried Green Tomatoes."

"Manson's involvement with the gruesome Sharon Tate murders is said to be the crystalizing event that ended the free-love, counter-culture 1960's decade. The Manson Family's horrific murders paralyzed Los Angeles, and later the sensational trial shocked television viewers around the world."

The research for the book was far-reaching, from Indiana to California, including Omaha's Boys Town. Readers will clearly see the story goes beyond Manson's boyhood troubles to delve into controversial social commentary.