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LAURENCE KESTERSON / Staff Photographer

The Milton Hershey School sprawls across roughly 10,000 acres in Hershey, Pa. The school has provided free tuition, room, and board for thousands of children.

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## **Milton Hershey School begins its 100th year**

By William Ecenbarger  
For The Inquirer

HERSHEY, Pa. - For the 100th time, students will assemble today for the first day of classes at an institution whose promotional literature boasts, "There is no other place like Milton Hershey School."

And it's true. Indeed, there is no other place on Earth quite like it.

It is the world's wealthiest, largest residential school for students in prekindergarten through 12th grade, school officials say. It sprawls over 10,000 acres of rolling green hills and is centered on a domed, marble building.

All of it was first built on the five-cent Hershey bar.

It was established in 1909 by Milton S. Hershey and his wife, Catherine, for the "maintenance, support and education" of "poor, healthy, white, male orphans between the ages of 8 through 18 years of age."

The first class of 10 boys convened in 1910 at the farmhouse where the chocolate magnate was born. They were trained to be farmers or tradesmen. Hershey, visionary though he was, probably would be astounded, though not dismayed, by the group that is gathering tomorrow.

There will be some 1,800 of them. Slightly more than half are girls, nearly one half are non-white, and very few of them are orphans. Their common denominator is that they are poor.

The school will provide them with everything - food, housing, clothing, medical and dental care, recreation, and, of course, an education.

In addition to homes and wireless classrooms, the campus has a 75,000-volume library, a student center, and an array of athletic facilities. There are a working dairy farm and orchard. School lets out for six weeks each summer, though many students are enticed to stay on campus with field trips, summer jobs, and internships.

When they reach the 11th grade, MHS students will be given a laptop, which they can take with them when they graduate. If they decide to go to college, the school will pay up to \$77,000.

The school will spend about \$75,000 this year on each student's care and education. If recent trends hold, about half of them will go on to four-year colleges and 40 percent will attend two-year colleges or technical schools. About one in 10 will leave MHS, usually because of homesickness or because a parent has decided the child should be at home.

Over the last 100 years, about 8,600 young men and women have graduated. One of them, Anthony J. Colistra, became its president on Aug. 3. Colistra grew up in a rowhouse in South Philadelphia until his father died and left his mother unable to work and raise three young children.

A few days after he moved into his new office on the MHS campus, Colistra felt the memory tugging at his sleeve. "It was a cold, bleak day - March 17, 1952. I took a trolley to the 30th Street Station, a train to Harrisburg, and a bus to Hershey. I was desperately homesick and felt abandoned. Only as an adult did I realize what an incredible act of courage it was for my mother to send me here.

"But the school nurtured me. It made me independent and self-reliant. It was my home-" His eyes brim, and he clears his throat.

The centennial student body, which will include 300 newcomers selected from about 2,000 applicants, will assemble at 7:45 a.m. in the 2,600-seat auditorium at Founders Hall, whose centerpiece is a bronze, life-size statue of Milton Hershey with a young boy.

He and his wife did not have children, and after Catherine Hershey died in 1915, he gave his entire personal fortune, which included 11,000 acres and controlling interest in his chocolate company, to the school. It is run by an eight-member board of managers, which is appointed by the trust that oversees the endowment. Hershey maintained an active interest in the school until he died in 1945.

Today the MHS charitable trust is worth about \$7 billion, dwarfing that of the nation's most exclusive prep schools and larger than all but a handful of university endowments. The school has increased its enrollment by some 50 per cent since 2002, and there are plans to go to 2,100 students by 2013.

Nevertheless, there are critics, including some alumni, who contend that the school should be doing more with its money.

The Capital Research Center, a nonprofit think-tank specializing in philanthropy, recently proposed that the endowment be used to establish satellite orphanages around the U.S.

"If the school continues as it has in the past, it will serve 1,500 poor children a year and give them lavish clothes, fancy equipment, and tuition, room, and board at the university of their choice," said the CRC. "But such a scheme does nothing to help the several hundred thousand children trapped in foster-care programs or in hellish homes."

No one denies that MHS lost its way in the 1990s, when it began accepting more middle-income students with promising academic futures. In December 2002, John A. O'Brien, an MHS alumnus, took over as president of the board and returned the focus to enrolling poor children to be given career and technical education.

One of those kids is 15-year-old George Glashoff of Willow Grove, who arrived three years ago and will begin 10th grade today. His younger brother and sister also attend MHS, and an older sister graduated last year and will begin premedical studies at Susquehanna University in the fall.

George's parents divorced nine years ago, and his mother was unable to work at three jobs and at the same time give adequate care to her children. He has blossomed at MHS, plays goalie on the soccer team, and hopes to become an automobile mechanic.

"I get to take automotive technology from the ninth grade through the 12th, and in my senior year I'll get to work in a local dealership or repair shop," he said.

Deanna Slamans and her husband, Andy, serve as house parents for George and 11 other boys. She bends to speak into a microphone on the wall: "Gentlemen, dinner is ready. Wash up first, and turn off all electronics."

Married couples such as the Slamans provide full-time supervision for each student residence, which resemble large suburban houses. These surrogate parents often become a stronger presence in the students' lives than their biological families.

"I came here myself in the eighth grade," says Slamans. "My home life in Harrisburg was bizarre. Seeing a stable family life, seeing a married couple interact, seeing what a family was supposed to be was eye-opening to me - and I knew it was something I wanted for myself."

George and his classmates lead structured lives that begin at 6 a.m. The boys make their beds, perform household chores, eat breakfast, and leave for class at 7:20 a.m. Classes end at 3

p.m. Dinner is at 5 p.m., followed by free time until 7 p.m. There is studying until the 9 p.m. bedtime.

"We are giving them a middle-class experience," Slamans says. "Somebody is here every day when they get home from school. . . . Somebody is here to help them with their schoolwork."

Twelve adolescent boys assemble at tables of four for dinner. There are Jordan from Williamsport, Ahmad from Reading, Chris from Washington, Yaphet from Harrisburg, Demel from Philadelphia, Ron from Philadelphia, Justin from Lancaster, C.J. from Pittsburgh, Derek from Harrisburg, Andrew from Upper Darby, Marcous from Burlington, Vt.

And George, who places his napkin on his lap and pauses. "Deanna and Andy are like my mom and dad to me," he says without being asked.