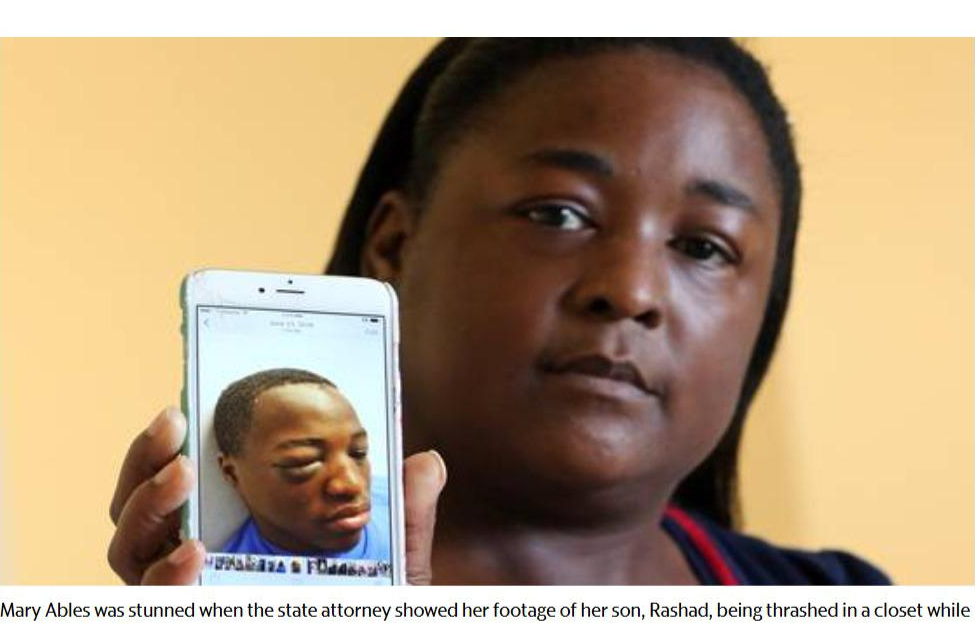
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Mary Ables was stunned when the state attorney showed her footage of her son, Rashad, being thrashed in a closet while two staffers at Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility stood by impassively. Both were arrested. **Emily Michot** - emichot@miamiherald.com

At this juvenile justice program, staffers set up fights — and then bet on them

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER AND AUDRA D.S. BURCH
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The allegations were straight out of Oliver Twist: Teens said there were maggots in the food — and barely enough of it. The youths wore threadbare and filthy clothing. They lacked soap, toothpaste, deodorant, socks. The medical care was lousy, toilets overflowed and the buildings were crumbling. Officers choked and punched them.

For discipline and diversion, workers organized fights among the detainees. And sometimes they bet on them.

The delinquent boys came and went. But Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility remained.

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Neither a dogged county mayor nor a compassionate chaplain nor even the whispers of victims could close the doors. It was a trail of missing money that finally forced reform, as the program's operator, Youth Services International, left Florida after being sued for defrauding the state by billing for services that were never provided.

"You send your kids there, you know they are not angels but they are not that bad either," said Mary Ables, whose son Rashad suffered a broken nose and eye socket in fights — all of them, he said, orchestrated by staff. "It was more like a prison, and all sorts of bad habits were picked up. It was not a place for kids."

While mayor of Palm Beach County, Shelley Vana worked for years to close the program. "How many bones have to be broken, how many kids have to go to the hospital before we actually do something?" she asked.

One of the most violent juvenile programs in the state was tucked alongside the South Florida Fairgrounds in West Palm Beach, a happy place where youngsters ride Ferris wheels and devour cotton candy.

It was at Palm Beach that Steven Santos refined his skills as a juvenile delinquent.

Lights on, lights off

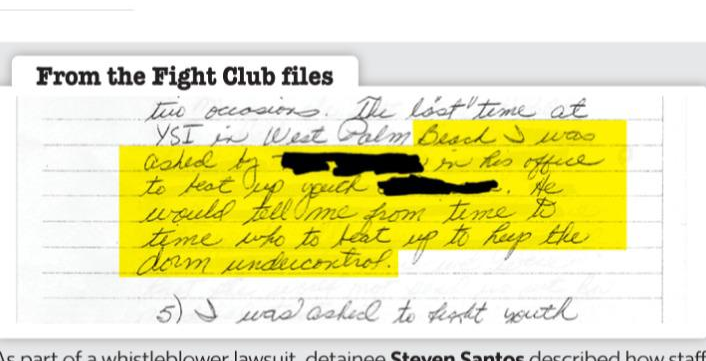
Santos was serving time for carrying a concealed weapon, robbery, aggravated battery and resisting arrest. At Palm Beach, his penchant for violence was cultivated, not corrected.



Steven Santos.
Florida Department of Corrections

In a declaration he signed in support of a whistle-blower lawsuit by others, Santos said he became a feared goon, tasked by guards with beating law and order into the other delinquents. In return, he was promised takeout food and time off his sentence.

One staffer, he confessed, "would tell me from time to time who to beat up to keep the dorm under control."



From the Fight Club files

two occasions. The last time at YSI in West Palm Beach I was asked by [redacted] in his office to beat up youth [redacted]. He would tell me from time to time who to beat up to keep the dorm undercontrol.
5) I was asked to fight youth

As part of a whistleblower lawsuit, detainee **Steven Santos** described how staff at a privately run residential program **enlisted him to beat up other youths**.

"Many of the fights at West Palm YSI were set up by the staff, and the staff would bet on the fights," Santos wrote. He graduated to the adult prison system on firearms, burglary and grand theft charges, from which he was released on Aug. 8.

The Miami Herald was unable to reach YSI. When the company settled the whistle-blower lawsuit in March 2016, it stipulated that it wished to settle the dispute "to avoid the substantial costs" of a protracted litigation. YSI, a court document said, "denied the validity of any and all claims."

For a time, Palm Beach Correctional was running the Department of Juvenile Justice's Inspector General's Office ragged. The accusations from boys in the program — contained in hundreds of pages of inspector general and police reports — were frequent and disturbing.

March 1, 2014: Rashad Ables goes to the infirmary with a swollen nose — later determined to be broken. At first, he says he was elbowed in the face during a basketball game. He later says it was a fight set up by staff.

May 22, 2014: As an assistant inspector general tours the program, a detainee tells her that, while he was in the intake area two months earlier, a high-level worker removed his handcuffs and made him masturbate in front of him. Weeks later, the 18-year-old refuses to discuss his allegation with an investigator, saying he was "tired of these people taking advantage of him."

June 22, 2014: Rashad Ables is beaten again. It is actually his third fight that was set up by staff, he tells investigators from the inspector general's office. This one leaves so much damage that facial surgery is required. The youth tells investigators — and video confirms — that two workers converted a supply closet into a mixed martial arts cage and then watched as another boy trounced him.



Closet became a cage for fighting

Rashad Ables took a fierce beating in this fight in a storage room (upper right) at Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility. Two staff members watched impassively. When it was over, they told Rashad to hide his injuries from the medical staff.

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

Sept. 11, 2014: A youth climbs on a desk and turns a surveillance camera lens toward the wall, rendering it blind. As seen on another camera, a detainee walks in the room holding cookies. At that moment, the lights are flicked off — by a staffer, according to youths — and at least four boys slug the kid in the head and chest. The light comes back on.



How to defeat surveillance

A youthful detainee turns a camera lens to the side shortly before a beating was administered in a classroom at the Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility. Youths told investigators the fight was arranged by staff.

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

One boy later tells investigators that a staff member had announced: "You all need to beat his ass," just before the attack.



A beating courtesy of classmates

A youth at Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility bounds into a classroom with cookies — and is immediately pounced upon by several boys throwing punches. Investigators were told that a staffer encouraged the attack and cut the lights just as the boy entered the room.

Department of Juvenile Justice

DJJ, the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office and child abuse investigators are told that staff members are "setting up youth fights."

The investigation that follows is damning, and it begins a month after workers already had been arrested for turning the youth program into a boxing club — minus the gloves and headgear. It begins with a handwritten letter from a youth that includes a plea: *"I'm starting to feel unprotected. And I feel that I am going to get seriously hurt if this continues."*

The fight club had its own lingo.

A veteran of the bouts told investigators that one staffer "often said that if anyone had 'pressure on their chest' to handle that 'off camera.' " Translation: If you have a problem with a fellow detainee, feel free to resolve it with your fists, but somewhere the cameras can't record. "Inside the blind spot is where it begins," the youth wrote.

Other workers would yell "youth support!" — a signal for detainees to grab a designated peer and drag him away to be beaten off camera. A surveillance video, unearthed as part of an inspector general investigation, purports to show just that.



'Youth support!': A cue to clobber somebody

According to detainees, one way staffers encouraged beatings was to announce "youth support!" This was a signal for boys to drop what they were doing and gang up on a designated peer. It happens here in this video. The woman standing by the door worked at the Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility.

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

A report from the inspector general's office concluded there was enough evidence to prove that workers "allowed youths to fight with little to no staff intervention," but insufficient evidence that they "arranged" the fights.

Nov. 19, 2014: A detainee says a worker called him a "f--- boy" and a "pussy," threw a chair at him and choked him, after the youth asked whether he was being punished for some infraction. The worker later admits that "he was not justified" in tossing the chair or "putting his hands on" the youth, but denies choking him. An investigation finds unnecessary force.

Feb. 15, 2015: A youth tosses a food tray in the direction of a worker, who then punches the boy "several" times — all of it on video. The allegation of unnecessary force is sustained.

March 2, 2015: A detainee on suicide watch refuses to leave his cell. A worker "allegedly placed his hands around the youth's neck, causing the youth's nose to bleed profusely." The incident is not reported to the state, as required, for more than four months.

Wads of cash and gang signs

In early summer 2015, Mayor Vana asked the county administrator to cancel DJJ's $1-a-year lease with Palm Beach County for the land beneath the compound. She had been invited to tour the program by a DJJ chaplain concerned about conditions there.

Others were alarmed as well. The county's retired top prosecutor, Barry Krischer, said in an email to Vana, a juvenile judge and others that the situation had become dire.

"The concern obviously is that while we are being polite and respectful, a child is seriously injured or worse," Krischer wrote on May 23, 2105.

The mayhem continues:



Youths square off as a staffer serves as referee

In this scene from Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility, two boys engage in mixed martial arts-style combat. The man in the green shirt works at the program.

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

June 12, 2015: A worker in a green polo shirt referees a mixed martial arts-style brawl between two shirtless youths in boxing-style trunks. DJJ's report on the bout later says the worker and a colleague "stand around watching" as the boys pummel each other — a description that appears to downplay their active participation as referees. The boys fight again the next day, and one of them suffers a broken jaw requiring surgery.

While DJJ is investigating, inspectors — and a local TV station — are alerted to Facebook photos of Palm Beach detainees displaying wads of contraband cash and flashing gang signs.

On June 22, 2015, DJJ Secretary Christina K. Daly writes the county's then-vice mayor, Mary Lou Berger, saying a cursory review turned up no evidence that "staff were involved" in recent incidents of violence. "I can assure you this department does not tolerate conduct or an environment that puts youth safety in jeopardy," she wrote.



While juvenile justice inspectors were looking into allegations that workers staged fights in June 2015, they discovered photos — like this one — of detainees wielding wads of cash or flashing gang signs.

Aug. 4, 2015: An assistant administrator reviewing video from three days earlier sees a shift supervisor vigorously choke a boy, purportedly in response to the youth "playing with" a light switch. One staffer says the boy's pleas for help "became faint … and ultimately stopped," an inspector general report said. Another says he "tapped out" the choker — and got sent home for interfering. One of the two staffers fails to report the incident at all; the other reports it only to the shift supervisor — who was the choker.

"Oh, my God. At the height of the incidents, it was unbelievable, first that it was happening in a civilized society and then, secondly … that no one wanted to do anything about it," said the former mayor. "We knew something really bad was going to happen there. We knew it."

A lot of bad things happened to youths, but complaints about those things didn't cost the operator its contract.

It was a false claims lawsuit. In 2012, Hollywood attorney Michael Aaron Hoffman filed a whistle-blower complaint against the management team's parent company, YSI. The suit included a written court declaration by youth care worker Christopher Kellman, saying kids would fight or gamble to win basic supplies. Bosses banned outdoor exercise for months, he said, to avoid the healthcare costs associated with routine injuries.

Staffer Tina Folger wrote in a court declaration that workers were forbidden to call police, even if they witnessed a youth being assaulted or a fellow staffer having sex with a detainee.

Employees said the compound regularly went without adequate staff, that workers rarely were trained, and that administrators ordered subordinates to falsify rosters and logbooks to hide those conditions. Staffers "were threatened with termination," Kellman wrote, if one of their restraints — forcible takedowns — had to be "written up."

"The facility would bribe youth with food in order to get good reports when … inspectors were coming," Kellman wrote. During those visits, "youths would be given new clothes to wear," he reported.

The director of case management, Antwyon Carter, wrote that staff phonied up "mental health files [and] treatment plans" in order to pass inspections — part of the financial chicanery that cost YSI its contracts.

In the summer of 2015, YSI agreed to sell its contract to operate Palm Beach. The company continued to run the program, though, until the following March, when state Attorney General Pam Bondi got involved. Under pressure, YSI agreed to sell a total of seven DJJ contracts as partial settlement of Hoffman's whistle-blower suit.

A recent tour of the compound, now run by Sequel Youth and Family Services, revealed freshly painted walls with urban-style murals, an art gallery, a well-stocked library, a wood shop and a program that allows detainees to train dogs rescued from a shelter to be service animals.

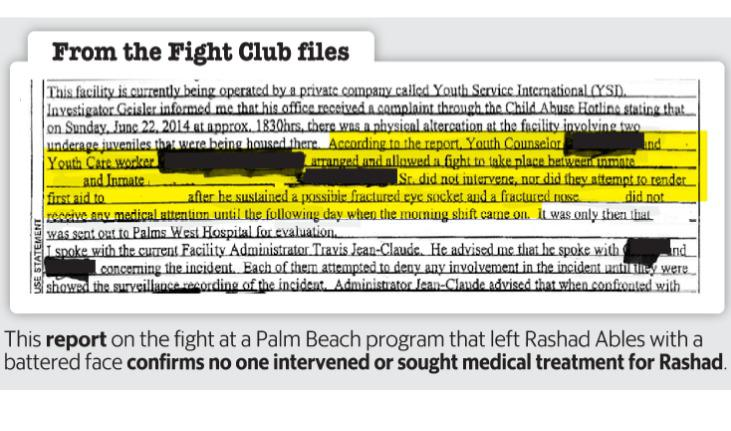
'Front-row seat'

One day, Mary Ables picked up her phone and listened to Rashad whisper. Her son told her he'd been in a fight — set up by staff — but was too scared to report it.

Ables went to court to ask the judge who sentenced her son for joyriding to let him go home. Instead, the judge ordered Rashad and the boy he fought with to stay separated, she said.

One month later, Rashad, 17, was too banged up to call his mom.

"I get another call 24 hours after he's been admitted to the hospital having to undergo surgery. I was not told right away what happened," Ables said. The same guard. The same youth. He "took them in a laundry room and watched them fight, even after this kid almost stomped him to death with his feet."



From the Fight Club files

This facility is currently being operated by a private company called Youth Service International (YSI). Investigator Geisler informed me that his office received a complaint through the Child Abuse Hotline stating that on Sunday, June 22, 2014 at approx. 1830hrs, there was a physical altercation at the facility involving two underage juveniles that were being housed there. According to the report, Youth Counselor [redacted] and Youth Care worker [redacted] arranged and allowed a fight to take place between inmate [redacted] and Inmate [redacted] Sr. did not intervene, nor did they attempt to render first aid to [redacted] after he sustained a possible fractured eye socket and a fractured nose. [redacted] did not receive any medical attention until the following day when the morning shift came on. It was only then that [redacted] was sent out to Palms West Hospital for evaluation.
I spoke with the current Facility Administrator Travis Jean-Claude. He advised me that he spoke with [redacted] and [redacted] concerning the incident. Each of them attempted to deny any involvement in the incident until they were showed the surveillance recording of the incident. Administrator Jean-Claude advised that when confronted with

This **report** on the fight at a Palm Beach program that left Rashad Ables with a battered face **confirms no one intervened or sought medical treatment for Rashad**.

A surgeon had to repair Rashad's face.

Youth counselors David Croney, now 43, and Vinny Valentino Jones Sr., now 26, oversaw the skirmish shortly after dinner on June 22, 2014. Video shows a group of boys clearing out a storage closet in the Delta dorm. Jones stations his chair in the hallway so he can have "a front-row seat," a DJJ report says.



David Croney
Florida Department of Corrections

In a handwritten statement, Rashad said Croney told him "to put on my shoes and go in the closet. I said no, if [the other youth] wants to fight me, let him come in my room. And staff said no, go in the closet."

In the video, Rashad's opponent, also 17, peels off his shirt and begins to shadow box and do squats. Then comes the 40-second bout, with Jones acting as a referee, breaking it up briefly, then allowing the fight to resume. The victor kicked Rashad as Jones finally led the loser out of the supply closet. Throughout, Croney sits on a table in the dayroom, and never tries to break it up.

Rashad later told detectives that the other teen attacked him immediately, "kicking and stomping him in the face," the police report said.

Rashad said he asked to go to the clinic but "staff told me no. Go to your room. And put something over your eye."

They gave him a glove packed with ice and instructed him to tell anyone who asked that he fell in his room and hit his head on the toilet, reports say. He was ordered to refuse nightly medication so the nurse would not see his injuries, and he papered over the window of his room.

Jones

Vinny Valentino Jones Sr.
Florida Department of Corrections

"And don't let nobody see," Rashad said he was told.

He was taken to the hospital a day after the fight.

The winner of the match confirmed Rashad's account. "He is not a rat, but stated that the fight between him and Rashad was arranged by Croney and Jones," a police report said. "Everyone in the dorm knew the fight was going to happen and when."

When Mary Ables arrived at her youngest son's hospital room, he lay in bed, one eye swollen shut, the second barely open and bloodshot. His right eye socket was fractured, his nose broken — again. He was shackled to the bed.

He saw her and started crying. "The first thing he said to me was he was ready to get out of there," she told the Herald.

Mary Ables Rashad 02 Fight Club EKM

Mary Ables' son, Rashad, was badly beaten during a fight set up by guards at a youth prison in West Palm Beach.
EMILY MICHOT - emichot@miamiherald.com

Croney and Jones resigned and were charged with child neglect. Both received three years probation.

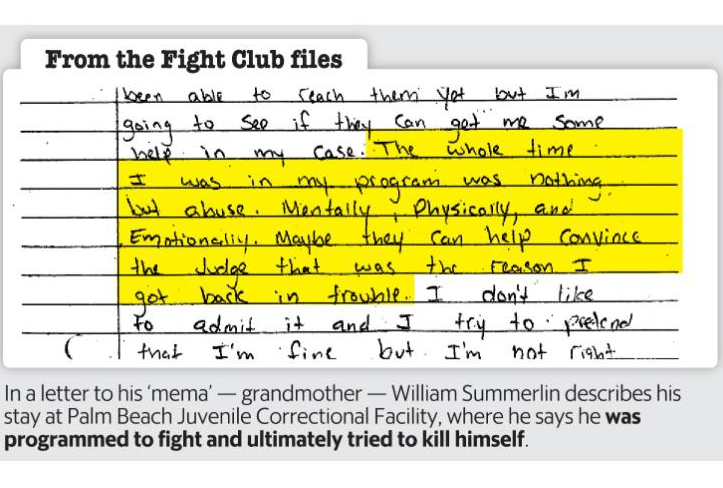
"This place is actually turning out criminals," Ables said.

Palm Beach did little to reform her son, now 20, who is serving a four-year sentence for robbery at DeSoto Correctional Institution Annex, and is expected to be released in August 2019.

A sharp object

William Summerlin is another Palm Beach Correctional product. He is 19 and has moved on to the adult court system. He is on probation for a recent burglary and theft, but when he spoke to the Herald he was in a jail in Frostproof, an hour south of Disney World. A slender figure dressed in an orange jumpsuit, Summerlin paced in circles before sitting down to discuss his 18 months at the program that has been renamed Palm Beach Youth Academy.

Summerlin, who says he was busted for smoking weed, described his stint as a blur of violence and abuse, a culture so dispiriting he wanted to die. He says he tried three times.



From the Fight Club files

been able to reach them yet but I'm going to see if they can get me some help in my case. The whole time I was in my program was nothing but abuse. Mentally, Physically, and Emotionally. Maybe they can help convince the Judge that was the reason I got back in trouble. I don't like to admit it and I try to pretend that I'm fine but I'm not right

In a letter to his 'mema' — grandmother — William Summerlin describes his stay at Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility, where he says he **was programmed to fight and ultimately tried to kill himself**.

On day two, he got into his first fight. During his second week, he was ambushed by a group of boys. By the time Summerlin walked out the door, he had become a violent, indifferent teen who regularly fought for prized $5 Chinese combo plates and honey buns.

"The guards had us fight for their entertainment," Summerlin said. "There's always fear, but after a while it gets easier."

Distraught over his grandmother's death and flustered over a clogged toilet, Summerlin took matters — and a sharp object — into his own hands. He said he sliced his wrist, curled up on the floor and waited to die.

Summerlin

William Summerlin
Polk County Jail

It was Aug. 5, 2015, around the time that Christina K. Daly, the DJJ secretary, appeared before county commissioners and assured them the program was improving.

Fredrick Robinson spent the last hour of his shift mopping up Summerlin's blood.

"It was a bad, bad situation," Robinson told the Herald. "He was not responding. I methodically and slowly approached him because I wasn't sure what he had cut himself with or where the weapon was. He was laying on his arm. Both hands were open. I assisted him to his feet and began looking for the weapon."

Summerlin was rushed to the clinic. Robinson returned to his office to write a report. He submitted the one-page account to his supervisors.

Robinson said he was ordered to bleach out the more gruesome details. He refused.

"The supervisor called me and told me to shut the 'f--- up,' " he said.

It was his last shift.

The front entrance of the Palm Beach Youth Academy in West Palm Beach, formerly the Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility.

The front entrance of the Palm Beach Youth Academy in West Palm Beach, formerly the Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility. **Emily Michot** - emichot@miamiherald.com

1 of 2

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