

Sophia Young

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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Professional Project

Advised by Dr. Elizabeth Hendrickson

[REDACTED]

Approvals:

My thesis advisor has approved this thesis and emailed my director of study.

My director of study has approved this prospectus and emailed both their approval and that of my advisor to honors.college@ohio.edu.

This thesis has been approved by

The Honors Tutorial College and the Scripps School of Journalism

Dr. Elizabeth Hendrickson

Associate Professor, Scripps School of Journalism

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Victoria LaPoe

Director of Studies, Journalism

Dr. Beth Novak

Interim Dean, Honors Tutorial College

Table of Contents

SCHOLARLY ESSAY.....	4-22
INTRODUCTION.....	4-6
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6-10
RESEARCH QUESTIONS/METHODS.....	10-11
REFLECTION.....	11-21
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	21-22
PROFESSIONAL PROJECT.....	23-49
EPISODE 1 SCRIPT.....	23-28
EPISODE 2 SCRIPT.....	28-35
EPISODE 3 SCRIPT.....	35-41
EPISODE 4 SCRIPT.....	41-46
EPISODE 5 SCRIPT.....	46-49

Introduction

People from all walks of life and backgrounds can have difficulties voicing their opinions and experiences when they feel as though what they have to say will not be well-received, either by members of a family, community, organization, or commonly today, the internet. This can be especially true when someone has survived a traumatic experience such as sexual violence, abuse or other harm and fears they will be blamed, not believed or experience retaliation or lack of justice (Simeon 1628). In relation to the media as a gauge of public opinion, this phenomenon of self-censoring has been coined as a “spiral of silence,” introduced by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in the 1970s (Taimoor-ul-Hassan 1150). Neumann’s theory propagates the idea that individuals use mass media and their immediate social environment to judge the opinion climate and whether one’s opinions or experiences will be well-received. If one feels they do not align with the majority, they will self-censor or withhold for fear of social isolation. The resulting silence further skews the public opinion perception of others, motivating their self-censorship and thus promoting the spiral (Eilders 32).

The troubled teen industry, a term used to refer to the highly profitable, nationwide network of private boarding schools advocating a therapeutic approach to reforming “troubled teens” struggling with anything from minor delinquency to substance abuse disorders, has produced a number of individuals experiencing a fear of sharing their experiences publicly for fear of retaliation. Many programs, which can cost upwards of \$100,000 per year, have faced allegations of abuse and use of harsh tactics resulting in trauma and harm to participants. The National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs estimates around 400 institutions to be operating around the U.S. and a 2007 Government Accountability Office found a myriad of

allegations including 1,619 against staff in at least 33 states (Clausing). However, in 2020, accusations around one specific school in Spring Valley, Arizona came to my attention through a small account sharing anonymous experiences of former students. The school, Spring Ridge Academy (SRA), was still open and hosting a residential therapy program that dozens of students were saying left them with trauma. Allegations could only be found hidden in the corners of the internet and small accounts, with no legitimate news coverage or press, inspiring me to research what caused a lack of action and discourse.

Students at SRA for years participated in a spiral of silence, feeling as though they would be criticized or not believed by sharing their experiences. Many had family members who would not believe them when told about experiences at the school. One parent of a student at a troubled teen industry school said parents are not inclined to trust their children because “there is not a teenager alive who wants to be in those programs” and “they are going to say anything to get home” (Clausing). Eilders describes the significance of frequent interpersonal interactions and the immediate social environment in influencing someone’s decision to express themselves (33) and attitudes and interactions like the parent above may minimize a student’s sense of security in voicing their experience. Coupled with inside pressure to limit communication with the world outside of the school, students often felt like silence was preferable.

This research paper will delve into the influence of a spiral of silence within the TTI, which allowed harmful and abusive practices to continue without reform at SRA. As the result of a direct environment among family members and school administrators perpetuating silence and creating a fear of retaliation or disbelief, students at SRA continued to withhold experiences for years from those close to them and various media. However, in addition to understanding the

spiral of silence covering abuses, it is necessary to understand how the spiral is ultimately broken and discourse changed, often through the use of social media to participate in a public forum (Taimoor-ul-Hassan). The paper will also discuss the ways in which the spiral has been breached through the using social media to form survivor networks, create content to share experiences in the public sphere and speak out at large about harmful practices which ultimately aided in the closure of the school in 2023.

Literature Review

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence theory" (SST) originated out of public opinion research and Tocqueville's saying, "more frightened of isolation than of committing an error, they joined the masses even though they did not agree with them" and John Locke's "law of opinion" (Banisch1). Neumann builds off this, describing one's innate desire to avoid social isolation. One does this by "observing his social environment, by assessing the distribution of opinions for and against his ideas, but above all by evaluating the strength (commitment), the urgency, and the chances of success of certain proposals and viewpoints (Noelle-Neumann 44). Neumann discusses viewpoints in terms of "winning" and "losing," with winning being what is perceived by an individual to be the dominant social viewpoint and losing being a minority opinion for which one fears he or she will be isolated for expressing. If an individual believes themselves to be in the minority (or losing) opinion, whether correctly or incorrectly, they will often self-censor which continues to skew perception of public opinion another direction (44). This is where the spiral comes into play and "the opinion whose strength is overestimated is displayed more in public (45).

Noelle-Neumann's research and findings is often applied regarding political and social debates, and people's willingness to express their opinions when they think they will be overpowered or not well-received. She points to mass-media as one device by which people determine public opinion outside of their immediate surroundings and interactions (51). When one perspective or opinion tends to dominate published coverage, it is likely that one may feel less inclined to share a contradictory opinion, Noelle-Neumann speculates. Banisch continued this, describing the ability for even majority opinion groups to refrain from expressing a standpoint because of "a distorted impression of public opinion enforced by the communicative activity of the different camps" (1). Banisch's research published in 2022 sought to operationalize SST, finding a neurobiological grounding for how the spiral functions. The model developed demonstrated that basal brain processes controlling reaction to social approval or disapproval "could have a tremendous impact on collective processes of opinion expression" (10).

While there is a great deal of focus in SST research on mass media, it is not to be ignored that immediate social interaction is still relevant and influential, as illustrated by Noelle-Neumann's original writings. Matthes took the description of immediate social interaction a step deeper, discussing the significance of the strength of ties to people in one's community to their willingness to express a contradicting opinion (Matthes 23). Additional research found expressing dissenting views to family, friends and neighbors had a stronger effect of censoring when compared with politicians, strangers or media due to a feeling of higher social accountability and greater risk of loss should one face isolation which encourages a desire to

maintain harmony (Mutz 2002). People may also not just self-censor opinions but experiences, based on how they perceive what they have to say will be received.

Silence in situations of abuse/discrimination

Often those who have experienced discrimination, abuse or negative experiences may remain silent due to fear of retaliation or lack of reception/belief. This, in turn, creates an environment where other possible victims do not feel as though their experience is shared and are more likely to remain silent as well. While little research on SST has been done specifically related to the troubled teen industry, other similar situations where institutional abuse exists have been analyzed. Ozeren examined the experiences of LGBT employees in Turkey and their tendency to self-censor their experiences and identities for fear of retaliation. The spiral exhibits itself through employees being “more likely to tell a lie or choose to remain silent given the lack of support from their work colleagues or perceived resistance against raising different voices,” which in turn “limits constructive discussions for organizational change and development” (219). Lack of legal protection, equitable policies and prominent heterosexists culture are all factors which individuals monitor to determine whether their standpoint will be accepted (219), and the lack of willingness to voice experiences only worsens the collective silence.

Similar studies exist with regards to experiences of sexual assault or abuse, and survivors’ willingness to share their experience based on perceived community reception. Simeon conducted several in-depth interviews with survivors of sexual violence, using an intersectional feminist framework to determine what influences one’s decision to remain silent about a traumatic experience. In one interview, a survivor (identified as TK) of childhood sexual

violence by their stepfather only chose to report the repeated instances years later, as an adult. However, the report was unable to be processed further because TK's family refused to accompany them as a witness, denying support and perpetuating public perception of shame and disbelief (Simeon 1632). After eventually landing their stepfather in prison, TK still faced degrading comments and name-calling on social media and threats from the perpetrator's family.

Several forms of silence can exist, two of which Ozeren categorized as "defensive silence" and "acquiescent silence," (223) which strongly pertain to instances like that of Spring Ridge Academy, where abusive practices are experienced but not overwhelmingly voiced. "Defensive silence" is described as a form of silence where one withholds thoughts, opinions or experiences because of a sense of self-protection and fear of social isolation, which matches closely with Noelle-Neumann's theory of silence contributing to the spiral. The second, "Acquiescent silence," is caused by a belief that the individual cannot change anything in an organization by voicing their concerns, opinions or experiences and thus have accepted defeat against the status quo (228). However, when a sufficiently large group is able to break the spiral, the gauge of public opinion can shift, allowing "for a movement to gain pace" (Banisch 1).

Digital platforms as a means for breaking the spiral

A topic of increasing research is the relationship between SST and social media in an increasingly digital interactive age. On one hand, users can observe the spiral on social media due to feedback coming in the form of likes, shares and comments influencing whether people feel comfortable and accepted expressing their views. On the other hand, there is a growing

study of the ability to use social media as a means of connecting with like-minded individuals and band together to break silence. With the self-selective component of media online, majority pressures may be weakened and “those with minority views can more easily find opinion support relative to offline venues” (Matthes 7). This, of course, is dependent on “the willingness of the supporters of different opinions to engage in the media” (Banisch 9). Social and online media can even be utilized to fill a gap in more traditional media coverage or information, balancing opinions by offering an alternative angle and finding other members who support it (Taimoor-ul-hassan 1555). The two-way communication dynamic of social media is an important component for this. With more involvement, members of the public can help substantiate or invalidate dominant opinions or standpoints (1552) and directly observe others’ opinions (Lee 2).

Lee describes the phenomenon of using social media as a means of finding shared opinions to break the spiral of silence as a “spiral of empowerment” (Lee 3). Lee’s research into employee willingness to voice positive/negative views in workplace topics online found when people holding a negative preexisting attitude saw other negative comments, they were more likely to express themselves and not feel at risk of isolation (22). Social media mobilization changing what is perceived as the dominant opinion can be found in many instances. For example, the #MeToo movement online where survivors spoke out about sexual harassment and abuse took what was once spoken about little online and created a space where millions of survivors shared their experience (Banisch 8). When a standpoint becomes more frequently expressed in a public forum like social media, participants feel less risk of social isolation by realizing others share similar views and experiences, breaking a spiral of silence. In an instance related to the troubled teen industry, Paris Hilton, a well-known American actress, singer and

businesswoman, began speaking out on social media as well as in a documentary and podcast about her experience at a troubled teen boarding school and the accompanying trauma. The star's story altered the public opinion landscape and inspired many more young women to share their experiences at similar schools.

In my research, I will be exploring the SST further by looking into how the spiral kept survivors of Spring Ridge Academy quiet for years, and ultimately, how finding a digital foothold allowed them to break the spiral and alter public opinion.

Interviews

As this research will have a lot to do with the impact of immediate social relationships on an individual's willingness to speak up or stay silent, I will be utilizing in-depth interviews to collect the bulk of my data. In-depth interviews facilitate rapport with sources and seek to find out "detailed information that sheds light on an individual's perspective, experiences, feelings, and the derived meaning about a particular topic or issue," (Rutledge, P. B., & Hogg 1), which is helpful for the personal narrative nature of my research. Questions will center around experiences at SRA, interactions with staff and family members and how those influenced their perception of the majority opinion about the school, and how they chose to express/handle their experiences after leaving. I would like to interview at least 10 individuals, at a minimum, to sufficiently develop an accurate narrative for the podcast portion of the project. I will also look at online reviews of the school on platforms such as Yelp, and any news stories/coverage of the school. A significant portion of research will also look at social media engagement by past SRA

attendees and online campaigns aimed at voicing student experiences on Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, Twitter and others, to observe how graduates use social media to connect and possibly break the spiral of silence.

Podcast

For the project portion of the thesis, I will synthesize findings about SRA into a narrative serial podcast, documenting the experiences of those who attended and the impact of the school's practices. Due to the depth and complexity of the topic, I feel that a podcast would be the best format to capture and hold the attention of the audience. With the intensity of experiences of SRA graduates, an audio format would also be more compelling as they are able to express themselves in their own words and voice to listeners. Interviewees will mainly be found through SRA networks on social media platforms and through online postings. All interviewees and participants will be clearly informed of the goal of the project and its format, and consent will be obtained. It is possible that in extenuating circumstances, anonymity may be granted for the safety of the interviewee and a pseudonym used.

Reflection

My personal journey into the journalism profession was inspired by the ability to tell stories, the ability to learn more about the world through the lived experience of others and the calling to share that information with others for the greater benefit of society. Throughout my academic career my skills in different mediums for storytelling have evolved and grown, with

my interests now advancing towards the incorporation of multimedia, specifically audio and video, in my work. For my thesis I wanted to build on that, and after deciding on the content of my project I knew a podcast would be the ideal format for telling this specific story. I have produced several podcasts before, however, never on such a sensitive topic or large scale. I knew the project would challenge my ability to produce an informative, tactful and engaging podcast which did justice to the story I was telling.

Concept

As described in the introduction, I was first introduced to the troubled teen industry and SRA through a former classmate, who attended SRA and spoke about her trauma. Though several documentaries, podcast episodes and articles exist on the broader industry, especially after star Paris Hilton spoke about her experiences at a private therapeutic boarding school, I wanted to narrow my project to just one school. I felt exploring the experiences of students at one school would be effective as a microcosm of a broader issue and would allow me to be more detailed and thorough in my narrative. It also seemed more feasible given the confines of time and resources to narrow the scope to investigating only one school within the TTI. Going into the project, I hoped to understand the nature of SRA's operations through interviews with previous students, employees, parents and advocates, as well as investigate how a school with so many current allegations of abuse and mistreatment continued to operate for nearly 40 years.

Initially, I was hesitant to select this topic for my thesis, as I knew I had limited time and resource constraints as a singular student. My principal concern was ensuring that I was able to accurately and responsibly share the stories of those who experienced SRA, and fairly investigate all available information. However, I believed strongly it is a story worth telling, and the

willingness of sources and advisors to participate and contribute to my research made the project possible, even given the constraints. Even so, a tremendous amount of information, perspectives and history was uncovered throughout my process, which was unable to be contained to five episodes alone. I believe more content could easily be added as an extension of this project, which I may continue in the future. To ensure transparency in my research and reporting process, as well as provide access to additional information that may not have been included in the final podcast audio, I created a web platform to upload transcripts, photo, video, additional audio and public documents for viewers to access during or after their listening experience. With such a complex and detailed story, I feel this addition was necessary and helped supplement the core audio project with further materials and support the accuracy of my reporting.

One of my most significant apprehensions when beginning this project, alongside telling an accurate and representative story, was the potential for retaliation from school administrators, former employees, or even troubled teen industry supporters. Though I was unsure whether my project would reach that widespread of an audience, I did fear the potential allegations of defamation when sharing content which publicly criticized a private company and its affiliates. As a result, I carefully traced every piece of information throughout my research process in meticulously organized digital folders, which I continuously referenced when scripting and planning my final project.

Title/Episodes

When thinking of a title for my podcast, I chose to include verbiage from the “troubled teen industry” label which advocates have assigned to the industry meant to treat adolescent behavioral and mental health. I chose “Troubled Treatment” intentionally as a repurposing of

language originally referring to teenagers as the “troubled” subject, instead referring to the treatment programs and therapies which caused thousands of youths lasting trauma. Throughout my interview and research processes, it became apparent that though many individuals struggled with a myriad of issues when entering SRA, the vast majority described their challenges as being exacerbated by the “treatment” they received while attending.

In the first episode, “Troubled,” I hoped to introduce listeners to the troubled teen industry world in a digestible way. To understand the way the SRA program operates and its significance in the broader context of adolescent treatment, it is necessary to have a foundational understanding of the industry and some of the criticism it has faced. I introduce some of the main student voices that listeners hear from throughout episodes and the various situations they experienced that led to their time at SRA. I also introduce the #breakingcodesilence movement, which has gained momentum in the past decade as more former troubled teen industry students voice their experiences within harmful programs, many of which remain open.

After gaining an understanding of what the SRA program was meant to achieve, and detrimental effects many students said it caused, the second episode, “Toxic,” dives deeper into the details of day-to-day life at Spring Ridge. The title comes from an interview with L.C., a former student who described participating in karaoke their first night at SRA, during which they unironically sang the song “Toxic” by Britany Spears. In the beginning of the episode, former SRA student Steph describes her journey of being involuntarily transported to SRA in the middle of the night by strangers, which many casually refer to in the industry as “gooning” or “getting gooned.” Listeners later begin to grasp the types of daily activities, therapies and workshops in

students' busy schedules by hearing from the students from episode 1, as well as several additional voices.

After explaining the TTI as well as the overall structure of SRA, in episode 3, we cover the four phases at SRA, and what each entail. Students describe the experience of participating in therapeutic “workshops” required to progress through the phases, which many deemed the most traumatic component of the program. Listeners gain insight into the closed-door sessions during which students were often brought to the verge of a breakdown for what were described as therapeutic purposes. I also include information from my extensive background research about the programming at SRA and its facilitators, which both have ties to previous unorthodox and heavily criticized groups and potential cults. In addition to touching on her history, I include student descriptions of Jeanine Courtney, which Shannon described in our interview as “Oz” or “the woman behind the curtain” at SRA.

In the fourth episode, after describing in detail the inner workings of SRA, I wanted to take a small step back and look at the larger picture. Did the therapies and programming at SRA benefit the students who attended? Why or why not? It turns out, most students I spoke with felt further traumatized after leaving the program than when they first entered. Students described the hostile and distrustful environment created as a result of students being encouraged and even rewarded to “snitch” on each other and give “feedback” to other students. Many reported not feeling as though they addressed their personal challenges, but rather became excellent at pretending to be ok and figuring out exactly how they must act to progress through the program and leave, even at the cost of others. I also wanted to include the parent perspective in this episode and how students were extremely restricted in communication during their time at SRA.

The parent concern and anxiety over their child's wellbeing creates industry for troubled teen schools, which Meg recounts in the episode, perpetuating harmful programs which are positively and effectively marketed as places of healing.

In my fifth and final episode, I wanted to wrap up the discussion around SRA the TTI by including audio from my research trip to Arizona and Spring Ridge after the school had closed. I wanted to see as much as I could firsthand of what students saw during their time in the program, and learned just how geographically isolated students were. I also wanted to briefly summarize what happened to administrators and staff who left SRA and draw attention to their participation in running similar programs after its closing. Meg Applegate, a former TTI student and current survivor advocate through her nonprofit, Unsilenced, brought this topic up in our conversation, pointing out the lack of regulation and oversight in the industry which prevents systemic change from occurring. I wanted to end the series with selections from Meg and I's conversation, where she expresses what she believes is necessary to help reform the industry and help adolescents get the effective, evidence-based and supportive help they need.

The Interviews

In the beginning of this project, I was extremely ambitious about the number of interviews I would ideally hope to conduct. In total, I conducted twelve interviews personally, and was granted permission to use audio from an additional interview on "The Cult Vault" podcast, and the recorded testimony of another former student. Of these, all but three were former SRA students and included another former TTI student, Meg, who later founded a successful nonprofit to advocate for TTI survivors. I also spoke with the parent of a former SRA student who sued the school, the Yavapai County sheriff where SRA is located, and neighbors

who lived near SRA. If I had more time and resources at hand, I would have liked to diversify my sources further, ideally speaking with administrators, legal experts in the world of TTI litigation and potentially additional parents. Unfortunately, I did not receive responses from the SRA administrators I reached out to, unsurprisingly.

With any journalistic interview, it is crucial to enter with an open mind and be considerate and mindful of the subject matter and the interviewee's relation to it. In the case of my project, this was especially important as most interviewees not only experienced traumatic events during their time at SRA but disclosed personal information about their life prior to attending. Approaching interviews with survivors of the troubled teen industry with care and sensitivity is of paramount importance due to the deeply traumatic nature of their experiences. Many survivors have endured psychological, emotional, and sometimes physical abuse during their time in these facilities. Their stories often involve themes of coercion, manipulation, and a loss of autonomy. Therefore, conducting interviews with empathy and understanding is essential to ensure survivors feel safe and respected while sharing their narratives. Additionally, sensitivity in interviewing practices can help mitigate the risk of re-traumatization, allowing survivors to express themselves freely and authentically. I took care to express to interviewees at the beginning of each discussion that they are free to guide the conversation in whatever direction they choose and are not required to answer any questions or disclose any information if they are not comfortable doing so. Though almost every interviewee I spoke with was surprisingly open with their experiences, including personal traumas, I was sure to ask if they were comfortable with me recording the conversation and using what they shared in my podcast/research. I was clear about the use of information and assured interviewees I would

share the final product when completed. Any information shared which interviewees declared off-the-record was not used or expressed after the conversation.

The benefits of conducting in-depth, long-form interviews were numerous in my research and allowed me to hear directly from those most affected by the industry in their own words. The interviews allowed for a deep exploration of survivors' experiences, providing ample time for them to articulate their stories in detail and share nuanced insights. This approach fosters a more profound understanding of the complex dynamics at play within these institutions, including the tactics used by staff and the lasting effects on survivors' lives. Moreover, long-form interviews afford survivors the opportunity to reclaim their narratives, offering a platform for their voices to be heard in their own words. During this process, I was able to develop deeper empathy and connection with the survivors, which I felt added to my ability to create a final product which drew listeners to empathize in a similar way. Additionally, the conversational nature of longform interviews encourages authenticity and trust between the interviewer and the survivor, facilitating a more meaningful exchange of information and fostering a supportive environment for survivors to share their truth.

Some interviewees, like Kristen, were timid but determined to share their experience. Kristen expressed to me that for years she tried to put SRA out of her mind, not speaking or thinking about it, or even networking with other survivors like so many had done. When I reached out to her about speaking with me for this project, she accepted, telling me that she felt it was time she finally reclaimed the story and did her part to speak up for the good of others. At times she spoke slowly and tentatively, and I could hear the pain of reliving the experience in her voice. However, many other survivors I spoke with, including Tay and Steph, were confident and

furious in their recounting of their experiences. They were eager to speak to the world about what they had gone through and hoped it would help others do the same. When speaking with Steph, you could hear her indignation and fury with those who run the program and the harm caused to so many students.

However, most of the students speaking with me were years out of the program at SRA. At first, many didn't feel safe or able to speak up at all, for fear of retaliation or disbelief. As explored in the podcast, students who told their parents or others of the mistreatment they endured were frequently discredited by administrators as dramatic or dishonest. Many parents assumed their child just did not want to be at the program and would say anything to leave. Meanwhile, those who were discovered to have spoken about their experience at SRA through the limited communication allowed, were often dropped down in the program or punished via feedback circles or other consequences.

My interview with Meg Applegate, the founder of Unsilenced, a non-profit advocacy organization helping survivors advocate and obtain restorative justice for their experiences in the TTI, was one which truly brought to light the challenges and complexity in recognizing and speaking out about abuse. Meg herself not only did not speak about her abuse at a TTI program but did not come to terms with her own abuse until almost two decades after she left. She described the road to advocacy and freedom as one that is difficult and complex due to both internal and external pressures. However, Meg and many of my other interviewees, including one of the founders of the @breakingcodesilenceSRA account on Instagram, eventually found both big and small ways to reclaim their story and share it with others.

Documentation/Public Records

As previously mentioned, in addition to longform interviews, this project was extremely document-heavy in my research, which required an extensive amount of organization. In the past year, I obtained almost 300 documents either through my own means or other individuals. These included marketing materials, program overviews and guides for students and parents, online testimonies, court documents, Arizona Department of Health Services citations and many more. Though not all information was directly included in the audio content of the podcast, it informed my research, sourcing and storytelling throughout the process, making sure I had a firm grasp on the information I was reporting to ensure quality and accuracy. As also mentioned prior, I hoped to share many documents digitally for listener education and transparency, within privacy and legal reason.

Conclusion

When listening to “Troubled Treatment,” my goal is for the audience to be able to empathize with those speaking, understanding the nature of the trauma that has been so often inflicted on minors in an industry meant to help them. But my primary goal was to allow a platform for survivors of the Troubled Teen industry to break the spiral of silence and share, in their own voice, their experiences, reclaiming a narrative which has hurt many for so long. With further awareness and understanding of shortcomings and abuses, there lies the potential for change and increased regulation in industries such as the TTI. When more survivors are given the opportunity to feel heard and supported, the spiral of silence allowing malpractice and mistreatment to continue slowly dissolves, as more people become unsilenced.

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Professional Project

Episode 1: “Troubled”

A warning to listeners: This episode contains mature content, including strong language, descriptions of trauma and mental illness, which may be disturbing to some listeners. Please listen with care.

Intro music

Sonja Saks: It looks nice, it looks very inviting... And, they paint it that way, you know, when a parent is on campus, they want it to look nice. I mean, they're selling it.

Kristen Sky: I was woken up in my bed in my house by what they call “bounty hunters,” I just remember it was like a really huge man and a woman. They were, like, dressed in suits.

Tay Barron: She was like, you're actually not going home. You're gonna go to a therapeutic boarding school for 14 to 18 months... And I went on the website, and I was immediately terrified.

Shannon Saul: At the time I kind of thought it was just a me thing, like it was just traumatic for me, but I've actually done more trauma work on Spring Ridge than I have on any other traumas in my life.

L.C.: I've never met a single person who has been like, “Oh yeah, Spring Ridge Academy like changed my life and I really believe in their program.” And like, none of us ever fell for it. We just pretended that we did because it was the fastest way to get out.

Narrator: You're listening to “Troubled Treatment.” I'm Sophie Young, a senior studying journalism at Ohio University. For over a year I have been exploring the therapeutic boarding school industry, often referred to as the “troubled teen industry” as part of my undergraduate thesis, looking closely at one particular school in the small town of Spring Valley, Arizona.

My interest in this particular topic began in early fall of 2020, when, as I was scrolling on Instagram, I came across a post from a girl I went to elementary school with, who we'll call Andrea. She was holding a flimsy posterboard, the kind you would use for class presentation in

grade school, and over her mouth was a black piece of duct tape. On the poster, in large writing, was written, "Spring Ridge Academy gave me" followed by numerous bullet points including trust issues, anxiety, an eating disorder, false diagnoses, nightmares, trauma and more. At the bottom of the poster was a hashtag, BREAKINGCODESILENCE.

The post was unexpected and a-typical for my feed, so naturally, I followed the hashtag and saw thousands of similar posts. Also tagged was an account called @breakingcodesilenceSRA, which had dozens of posts, some similar to my friend and others just screenshots of private messages to the account. Each post mentioned Spring Ridge Academy, and each individual named one horrible account after another of their inpatient experiences at the institution.

Several Google searches later, I learned that Spring Ridge Academy was a small, private therapeutic boarding school in Arizona providing education and counseling for teenage girls who were struggling with a wide range of issues, from addiction and mental health challenges to defiance and eating disorders. At least, that's how their website described it.

Music

Sonja: It was a very shame-based community in many ways. We had group punishment which I think is a really an effective social, you know, one person did something wrong and now the whole community had to suffer. And the goal there was, oh, the whole community should shame this person... Cause everyone, it's like a rat race to get out... It's this very anxiety provoking environment of like, I need to impress my therapist, I need to throw everybody else under the bus to try and get out.

Steph: I mean, a handful of people came out like genuinely "Oh, wow, I'm cured," but like it's fucking most of us that I know and still talk to just have residual trauma and just have like, this residual fucked up sense of self.

Music

I talked with nearly a dozen individuals about their experiences arriving at Spring Ridge, and what it was like living there. One commonality was that, as teenagers, they struggled with issues at home or unsupported mental health challenges.

Tay: My biggest issue that I was going to Spring Ridge for were like depression, self, like no self-confidence. I really did not enjoy who I was. I also had a lot of entitlement, a lot of brattiness.

Narrator: *Tay attended SRA for 12 months during her high school years after a conflict with her parents prompted her to explain her mental health challenges.*

Tay: My parents caught me in a Denny's parking lot at 3 o'clock in the morning one time, it was the first time I had ever done anything where I lied to them or where I told them I wasn't doing what I was. I told them I was at my friend Gabby's house; I turned my location off and everything... I decided I was like, "okay it's time to tell them where this is actually coming from, so they don't have to be angry with me for being me." So, I explained to them how I had been feeling awfully depressed, like waking up every morning was like a death sentence.

Narrator: *After telling her parents she didn't want to go back to school, Tay attended two short-term residential facilities in Texas and then California, before being sent to Spring Ridge for a long-term stay.*

Tay: When I first got there, I was like, "I do not need to be here," because I was seeing girls who were ex cocaine addicts, shit like that... and I was just like, I don't really need to be here.

Narrator: *Some students at Spring Ridge went voluntarily at first, like L.C. who I spoke with about their decision to try to turn their life around.*

L.C.: I had a lot of anxiety, a lot of depression, a lot of resent towards like authority and, you know, wasn't listening. I ended up really struggling to leave my house or kind of do anything to the point where I kind of stopped going to school and ended up kind of dropping out, in a way, of school.

Narrator: *After spending time in inpatient treatment and homeschooling, L.C. returned to school only to find themself struggling with the same issues.*

L.C.: My therapist connected my parents with an educational consultant who originally wanted to send me to a wilderness program, and I ended up being really apprehensive to go so my educational consultant ended up recommending that because I was, you know, willing and able and I had been in therapy, and it was more so my choice to seek this kind of treatment, ended up recommending that I just go straight to Spring Ridge.

Explanatory music

Narrator: *Spring Ridge, referred to frequently by those who know it at SRA, advertised itself as "a clinical therapeutic program with a college preparatory academic curriculum" with an average stay of 14 to 18 months, according to its enrollment agreement. Its online description advertised a wide range of therapeutic and psychological treatments, from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, 12 steps groups and family therapies, to art therapy and sand therapy. Outside of therapies and school, students could participate in horseback riding, ceramics, cooking and a variety of other physical and artistic activities. The small campus nestled in the Arizona desert was well kept, attractive even. From the outside, it seemed in every way to be a supportive place to heal from trauma and address personal challenges.*

One young woman I spoke with, Sonja described her first impressions of SRA after arriving.

Sonja: It looked nice, it looked very inviting. And it was a sunny day, and they have this little rabbit hutch where there's bunnies that you can, like, hold and take care of outside. And the girls seemed super nice and inviting and they introduced themselves to me. I think they painted it that way... Because they, I mean, they're selling it.

Narrator: *And apparently, it sells pretty well. But SRA is not the only therapeutic boarding school in the U.S... not even by a long shot. The industry of adolescent-targeted residential treatment boarding schools is so large and so often criticized, that it is frequently referred to as the "troubled teen industry." The troubled teen industry encompasses residential facilities, wilderness and retreat programs, religious facilities, rehabilitation centers and more, according to the American Bar Association, who estimates that more than 50,000 adolescents are privately placed by their parents. Many of the facilities are for-profit, with a hefty price tag. Spring Ridge advertises online a \$10,750 cost per month, which would put a typical 14 month stay at over \$150,000.*

Music

But though well-advertised, well-established, and well-funded, the troubled teen industry and schools like Spring Ridge have faced increasing backlash from former residents, who have brought forward serious allegations of malpractice, abuse and fraud.

Paris Hilton: I attended four of these facilities. They were called emotional growth schools, but it was not that at all. I was physically, verbally, emotionally abused. My peers around me were being sexually abused. I was strangled, I was hit, I was cut off from the outside world. I couldn't tell my family because any time I tried to say anything on the phone, they would hang up and I would get punished. It was the most traumatizing experience I've ever gone through in my life and to this day I still have severe PTSD because of it.

Narrator: *In her 2020 documentary, "This is Paris," American media personality and businesswoman Paris Hilton spoke out about her experiences at multiple schools within the Troubled Teen Industry. In 2021, Hilton went on to publish an Op-Ed with the Washington Post about her experiences and the need for reform in the industry and promoted the movement, Breaking Code Silence, that I first heard about after learning about Spring Ridge Academy. Although Hilton's name recognition brought media attention to TTI issues, Hilton was not the first to speak out about her experiences, nor the founder of Breaking Code Silence, which was coined in 2013 as a space for survivors to share their stories. Today, Breaking Code Silence has evolved to become a successful nonprofit conducting research, advocacy, legal and educational efforts related to the troubled teen industry.*

Meg Applegate, a former resident at a behavioral health facility in Montana called Chrysalis, founded a similar organization called “Unsilenced,” after realizing how the abuse she endured during her inpatient time was affecting her life. Meg says she was in her early 30’s, after of her classmates took her life, that she realized and shared her own experiences and traumas. After that, she refused to stay silent any longer about what she saw occurring in the industry.

Meg: I had this choice: I saw things that I didn’t agree with and then I can either be the good Chrysalis girl I was taught to be and, you know, “don’t be dramatic Meg, don’t be dramatic,” you know, all the shit that I had heard my whole childhood, or I could be unsilenced and I could speak up about the things I didn’t agree with. And I chose to speak up... I wanted to name it unsilenced in a very intentional way because, I think #breakingcodesilence, it’s a very necessary part of every movement. And I still use that hashtag today, because it’s that angry vindication that, you know, like the imagery of ripping off the tape, it’s extremely moving and powerful, but we’ve moved past that. We are no longer angry about it, we are grown up troubled teens and we are going to, in an adult way, take down this industry.

Narrator: The striking visual imagery of the tape was something I immediately noticed when doing that first Instagram search of breaking code silence and Spring Ridge Academy. Others shared their experiences via anonymous DM, such as the following, voiced by actors:

Survivor 1: “Despite everything going on since I departed Spring Ridge Academy in 2020 in regard to breaking code silence and the Paris Hilton Documentary on TTI, I haven’t talked about it much... This elaborately put together bullshit was a ruse to drain pockets of families in desperation only leaving them with empty pockets and children more empty than when they first set foot in the desert we were trapped in. We went in because we were broken and we left with more scars and bruises, but at least we got a band aid.

Survivor 2: My biggest difficulty since leaving SRA has been coming to terms with the psychological abuse I faced while enrolled. SRA’s impact on me still lingers. I struggle to be forthcoming with the people I’m closest to because of SRA’s conditioning. After graduating I was unable to be honest with myself at times as a direct result of the way my identity was disrespected, degraded, devalued, denied and demoralized.

Survivor 3: My experience of the program overall is a lot like what other students have said- feedback groups utilizing humiliation and attack therapy tactics, fear of punishment or getting my process slowed down preventing me from making necessary therapeutic process and so on. One of the main things I struggled with was inauthenticity and fear of judgement. Not only did SRA not help me with this, it actively made it worse.

Narrator: These are just a few excerpts from dozens of testimonies posted online. Others alleged staff incompetence, malnutrition, inhumane treatment and medical neglect, to name just a few.

Many former residents chimed in in the comments, validating others' experiences and offering support. Yet, despite widespread participation in these online communities such as Breaking Code Silence over the years, many of the decades old programs remain in operation.

I needed to do more research to understand why, so I immersed myself in the troubled teen industry world.

When reading about breaking code silence and therapeutic programs, I frequently came across the term "WWASP," short for "World-Wide Association of Specialty Programs." It is a term that you hear come up a lot when hearing about the troubled teen industry, and though it refers to a specific network of adolescent therapeutic schools and programs, it is often more broadly used to refer to all troubled teen industry schools and certain alternative therapeutic practices. When talking about some of the most severe abuses in the industry, WWASP's name almost always appears. The former network of international schools was started in the early 90s by a man named Robert Lichfield and began facing investigations of child abuse and unhealthy conditions in the early 2000s. The organization eventually dissolved, facing a lawsuit with over 350 plaintiffs alleging physical and sexual child abuse as well as racketeering and fraud.

Though WWASP no longer exists as an organization, many troubled teen industry programs employ similar models of treatment and "therapies. In fact, Staff who previously worked in TTI programs have been known to work at other similar programs or even start their own. According to a profile in the LA times, Lichfield himself, who founded WWASP, worked previously at Provo Canyon School in the 70s-- the school which Paris Hilton attended and later publicly criticized for abuse. Jeanine Courtney, the founder of Spring Ridge Academy, was formerly employed at a WWASP affiliate, Cross Creek Programs, in Utah.

Music

Narrator: Next episode on Troubled Treatment...

Steph: The people were just basically like, "Hey, you need to pack a bag like we, we've been hired to take you somewhere," like and I said, "where?" They don't tell you where they don't answer any of your questions other than, like, "What should I do right now?" And then I also said no. And, you know, they're like, "well, if you resist, you know, like, we can touch you, like we can, we can physically move you."

L.C.: I turned myself into an SRA robot, right, like, that's what we would call them, like, you know, when I was in the lower phases had just gotten there. And there were these girls who were like tearing other people down who were doing everything they were told, who were, you know, happy and excited and like wanting to get better. They were the Spring Ridge robots. They were people who had given themselves over to the program, or at least had appeared to. And I now

know, and I talked to many people that I had called an SRA robot, I now know that it's all a performance.

Outro music

Narrator: Thanks for listening to episode 1 of Troubled Treatment. For transcripts, documents, additional information and more visit our page, linked in the show description.

Episode 2 “Toxic”

A warning to listeners: This episode contains mature content, including strong language, descriptions of trauma and mental illness, which may be disturbing to some listeners. Please listen with care.

Intro music

Narrator: *Last Episode on Troubled Treatment, we learned of Spring Ridge Academy, a therapeutic boarding school in Arizona meant to help teenagers who were struggling with issues from mental health and trauma to insecurity and family conflicts. But we also learned about the network of schools forming which many know as the “troubled teen industry,” which faces increasing backlash through the #breakingcodesilence movement over its controversial therapies and practices. This episode, we dive deeper into what treatment looked like at Spring Ridge, and what some of the residents there experienced day-to-day.*

Music continues and ends

Steph: 4:30 am, like, my parents came into my room followed by like, two strangers I've never seen, you know, and I'm like, “Oh, shit, what the hell's going on?” ... My parents barely said anything. They were just like, we can't, we can't parent you anymore. So, we're gonna let someone else try in more words than that, but very minimal-- they left the room. And like, definitely the biggest thing for me was like, I was screaming, like, at the top of my lungs, like, you know, begging these fucking people to come back. I would not see my parents again until Arizona...The people were just basically like, “hey, you need to pack a bag like we we've been hired to take you somewhere,” like and I said, “where?” They don't tell you where they don't answer any of your questions other than, like, “what should I do right now?” And then I also said no. And, you know, they're like, “Well, if you resist, you know, like, we can touch you, like we can, we can physically move you.”

Narrator: *Though some residents at SRA went willingly, or at the very least knowledgeable of where they were going. Steph, whose voice you just heard, was involuntarily transported, a third-party service paid for by parents and frequently used in the troubled teen industry to take teens to therapeutic facilities.*

Steph: I think they call themselves, like, professional transporters in like, technical terms. But yeah, we just call them like, they are goons, you got “gooned,” whatever it was. So yeah, I just packed a bag, got in the car. They also had cuffs in the car which made me think that some girls are like, a lot less inclined to follow... They didn’t answer a lot of questions, just kind of made small talk. They took me to the airport so that’s when I figured out I was going out of state. I figured out I was going to Phoenix when I got to the gate, you know I’m just kind of like absorbing information as like, I’ve never heard of this industry at the time so I’m like, this is crazy.

Narrator: *Steph and the transporters flew to Phoenix, rented a car and drove the almost two hours to Spring Valley, all with Steph still unaware of where she was going.*

Steph: They got to SRA and like, pulled into like the little side town and got my stuff and, like, me out into the first little building like the little entryway or whatever it is, and checked me in with someone. And, like, I genuinely didn’t ever see them again.

After the people had like, like the goons had gone, I was just waiting for what’s going to happen next, like who is going to take over this because clearly, I’m not in control right now. Honestly, the first impression, I wrote about this in my college essay even because it stuck with me. My first impression, the first thing other than the front desk lady after they had taken me into the complex, the first thing that the lady’s like, she was a higher up lady I later found out... she was like, “Your shorts are too short.” And I was like, in my pajama shorts that I had like scrambled into at 4:30 in the morning. I didn’t even say anything, I don’t think.

Transition music

Narrator: *Whether they went willingly or unwillingly, most of the people I spoke with had similar first impressions of SRA when they first arrived. Things seemed nice and the people seemed friendly, or at least at first.*

L.C., who we heard from last episode about their hopes of turning their mental health around, described what their first day at Spring Ridge was like.

L.C.: So, I remember when I first got there, we kind of, you know, went into the offices, they talked to me a little bit about what to expect my life to look like. After that, they checked my bags and I went to the nurses to do like, my body scan. When you come in, they take record of scars, piercings, tattoos, things like that in an attempt to make sure you don’t do anything you’re

not supposed to... Then I went and met my bigs. SRA has a system where new girls are paired with upper phase girls who have been there for a while. I had two bigs who were interesting. One of them was also my roommate at the time and I remember meeting her. She was super excited to meet me... My dad left, we said goodbye and then we did dinner, I was thrown right into the meals and the therapy and like evening activities.

Very specifically, I always tell this story to people when I'm talking to people about my first night at Spring Ridge Academy. I didn't know anyone, and the evening activity was karaoke. And I sang Toxic by Britney Spears. And it's so funny looking back on it.

Narrator: Maggie, a former SRA student, spoke on The Cult Vault podcast about her experiences in the troubled teen industry, and how many rules she encountered when she first arrived.

Maggie: I just remember like her being there and like, like going through, like, every single rule that there was, and like, all of these things that just seemed like, like ridiculous about, like, you can change here, but you can't like, you know, even though no one can see you, if you change here, you can't change there. Because that's like, not allowed. Or you have to, if you're a phase one or two, you have to ask if you want to leave your room. Um, and then you have to ask if you want to go anywhere, and then the staff will have to like, you know, talk on walkie talkie to be like "Maggie is coming over here" and then you'd walk over and the other staff member when they saw you would be like "I see Maggie"... And I knew that I couldn't talk to other pretty sure I can talk to other lower phases, I definitely couldn't speak to other phase ones, right?

Narrator: Phases is a term you hear a lot at SRA. Their therapeutic treatment model, according to SRA's online therapeutic phase overview, is fourfold. Phase 1 is considered orientation, where students are supposed to be acclimating to their environment and beginning therapeutic processes for approximately 4 weeks, according to the guide. Phase 2 is referred to as "consistency," where students quote, "internalize the process, finding value in feeling, thinking and behaving differently as they are seeing new results in their lives as a result of internal change." This is described as 4-6 months. Phase 3, integration, is described as more family-focused where students work on trust and reestablishing family structure for around 3 months. Phase 4, transition, precedes graduation where students prepare to reenter the outside world, estimated to be at least 4 months.

Jaci: Phase one, you get to have like one phone call a week, I think I'm not sure if it's a week or a month, but you get a very short phone call and your CLD (Community Life Director) is there with you. And then so phase two, you get a phone call, like a 15-minute phone call or 20 minutes maybe. And you have to like you have to schedule your phone calls and if your family doesn't call you then too bad. There was many times that my family forgot to call, and I was just, we were in the library and their staff listening at all times, maybe three girls talking to their parents. If I would speak in Spanish, I had to hang up, I couldn't speak in Spanish. Then as face threes,

you are able to take those phones, not your personal phone, it's like the school phone, outside and talk for like 20 minutes or so just without ears, you can now talk by yourself. And then as phase 4 you get your flip phone, but you're supposed to have like, an hour for the whole week or an hour and a half.

Narrator: Progressing phases brings new privileges for students and takes them one step closer to graduation, incentivizing them to progress. However, former students of SRA describe the four-phases path to be anything but linear and the timeline extremely flexible. Some students remained on phases for months at a time, while others progressed quickly. Many people I talked to spoke of getting "dropped," phases as well.

Tay: For the first six months that I was there I made zero progress. I was so upset... And throughout my time there I had a lot of ups, a lot of downs. I was dropped. Phases. There were like four phases. The girls warned me like, whatever you do, just don't stay in bed all day. Like, they'll drop you or put you on watch, which is one-on-one...

L.C.: I guess I went from phase one to phase four, like the fastest I've ever heard of. I got dropped in mid-July, back down to phase one. So introductory phase after I'd been there. And it's like it was a stupid thing of like, I kissed another girl on a dare. Like, that's why that dropped right... So, I jumped from phase one to phase four incredibly quickly. Because I kind of figured out that performative aspect of it. And I, I turned myself into an SRA robot, right, like, that's what we would call them, like, you know, when I was in the lower phases had just gotten there. And there were these girls who were like tearing other people down who were doing everything they were told, who were, you know, happy and excited and like wanting to get better. They were the Spring Ridge robots. They were you know, people who had given themselves over to the program, or at least had appeared to.

Narrator: Some spoke of getting dropped for accessing social media when visiting home, some for trying to leave the school, and others for not progressing in therapies or activities. But there were other consequences for breaking rules, according to students.

Kristen: I remember like they would make us write in a diary. But then the therapist would read our diary. And I had written, like, some Marilyn Manson lyrics in it. Um, when I got in trouble for that. So other there when there were new girls coming to the school, like maybe one or two a week or less than that. They were not allowed to speak to me because I was called what's they called it "non-working." She's non-working. And that means like she's not working on herself.

Steph: Basically, being put, you could be put on that with a specific person, you can be put on that with everyone where like you, specifically, like you're not allowed to be talked to or talk to anyone. And I think I think I only saw that happen. Like once when they had a girl on suicide

watch... I remember she was on whatever it was called, where we were not allowed to speak to her. And she wasn't allowed to speak to us.

Molly: At one point during my stay, at Spring Ridge Academy, I was put on something called Intro, as a punishment where I lost the privilege of using my voice, which was initially set for a week. But during that week, I used my voice to ask a question, and it was extended by yet another week for not complying were, so it was two weeks, but I wasn't able to use my voice. To lose the right to speak up for myself was terrifying, not that I was ever listened to when I did speak up for myself, but still, like the fact that I felt like my voice was taken away was completely just a dehumanizing experience for me.

L.C.: I remember specifically Erin Smith writing a response to Breaking Code silence, she wrote an article and in that article she referenced students always having basic needs met, and like, the right to sleep, to clothing, to personal heigiene and things like that. And I remember responding to this pretty publicly and being like “you took my mattress away for three months, I had to sleep on the floor” because that was the punishment for the repeated refusals. Was, “If you aren’t going to get out of bed, we are going to take your bed.” I had all of my books taken away, I had most of my personal belongings taken away. I was allowed to keep a pair of pajamas, one school uniform, and then like toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, hairbrush. Until eventually, the bargain that was struck was that for every class or activity I went to, I would get one item back. I would go to the office, they would have a list like “ok, you did this, you did this, you did this, you can pick three items to have back.” The one thing I was not allowed to take back was my mattress. I remember I eventually was given that back by my therapist and my treatment team, I want to say about three months after I lost it.

Transition music

Narrator: *An important aspect of the therapeutic process at Spring Ridge was called a “caseload,” something you’ll hear former students mention often.*

Sonja: So, caseload basically, everybody is sectioned off. Once you get there, into a group that's run by a specific therapist, for whatever problems they think you have most of. There’s trauma caseload eating disorder caseload, family problem caseload, you know, so like, you come in, and they're like, Oh, this person struggles the most with this, we're gonna put them with the with the other people that struggle the most with this.

Maggie: If the group of students who had the same therapist, that was your caseload, and then each caseload had a treatment team, so it'd be like your therapist and two staff members. And two teachers were like, on it, so then they would all meet and like talk about you. So like, everything was kind of like they tried to be like as, like this very holistic thing.

Narrator: *Most of a student's time at SRA was spent with their caseload. Beginning with an early wakeup call in the morning.*

Kristen: Part of what was supposed to be therapeutic was like, a lot of structure. So, we woke up at a certain time early in the morning. And we had to do a lot of chores. And we were written up, I was constantly getting in trouble for like, leaving my slippers neatly lined up at the side of my bed. Things that if it was out of place if your bed wasn't made, like military style.

Jaci: We would wake up pretty early in the mornings, I can't remember the times, maybe like 7 we would wake up at?...one of the punishments was if we weren't like behaving well, or the whole dorm was not behaving well, we would have to wake up earlier like six, or 6:30 and just sit in the hallway and not do anything. Then after that, we would come up to our rooms get ready for class, maybe like an hour getting ready...We had three classes a day. And it was like block schedule throughout the week. And so, you'd have two in the morning, lunch, and then back to one class. And then after that class, it would end like around 2:45, maybe three.

Maggie: So, we had an hour in the morning, probably like an hour, hour and a half in the afternoon, where it would be like a sport of some sort, or like running or some sort of like, they were very in on making us run, and do a lot of physical exercise. And then after that, we would have like a hour, hour and a half long, like, therapy group of some sort. And sometimes that was what was called, like, caseload group, which was when you would meet with your caseload, and your, there'd be staff members, and then there would be like your therapist, and that was, yeah, that was twice a week.

Narrator: *Afternoon activities day-to-day would cycle through various components of the treatment model, according to students. Some days it was caseload, sometimes a whole school group, and sometimes individual or family therapy. After dinner, the lower phases would go to study hall, while upper phases were able to study in the dorms. 10 pm was lights out before another early day started.*

Kristen: So, it was kind of like normal high school sort of stuff with very regimented, like, you know, chores and ways of behaving.

Shannon Saul: I also felt like the most traumatizing part of the program for me personally were the trainings themselves.

Narration: *In day-to-day life, most students described their schedule as relatively normal, if not a little tiring. However, many of the former students I spoke with found the most difficult part of SRA to be the therapeutic aspects, of which there were many. Sonja described her experience in caseload getting put in the "hot seat."*

Sonja: Caseload was always a very anxiety provoking thing for students, because you'd be on the hot seat, there's a chance for you to be on the hot seat. So, you go in and then your therapist picks one person, at least in my caseload... You'd be like leaving class and dreading caseload because you're going to go in there, and she's going to call you out, and, and get everybody else in the group to make you feel like shit about yourself. But there's no, there's no building after that. It's like just shame, shame, shame, "something's wrong with you, you're broken. Everybody knows that you're a toxic member in the community. Nobody likes you, you have all these problems," shame, shame, shame. You know, it's like an any walk away and tears, just feeling like shit about yourself just completely destroyed. There was never, like, you know, there was nothing constructive. It was, it was, um, "and this is why you're not moving up. And this is why you suck." You know, it was never, "this is something that we think you're struggling with, how can the community come together to help you figure this out?" You know, there was nothing constructive like that there was nothing like, how can we come together as your caseload and your family to say like, what is it that we can do to work on this with you to help you grow as a person, it was just shame, shame, shame.

Narrator: Many students also mentioned larger group gatherings as particularly distressing.

Sonja: So, we're brought into the APR, which is this all-purpose room, they call it the APR. And it's just this huge empty room that Jeannie uses for trainings. It was a very, very, very empty room. And all the girls line up around the edges in a big circle against the wall, and you've got like, 60-70 girls in there, and then Jeannie comes in with the therapist, I mean, the whole community shows up for this. And then they bring one girl into the, into the center of the room, that they think it's a problem for some reason, or is doing something wrong or isn't working their program, and they set them in the middle and just have the whole community just go at them, just, I mean, just tear them apart. And they're just laughed at, like crumpled on the floor, just feeling horrible about themselves. And then it carries in into the community afterwards, you know, it's like, no one's gonna sit with you at the table for lunch. And like, nobody wants to be your roommate, and nobody wants to be around you. And it wasn't even for things they were doing wrong, it was because if we were seen with this person, we weren't working our program.

Shannon: Their response was to put all of us in the face for a group who had been involved in the middle of like the big room on campus and had all of the staff that were on at the time, stand around us. And we were sitting on the ground, and they stood in like a really big circle around us. They're probably like 50 to 60 staff members. And they each went around and individually told us how terrified they were that ISIS was going to come attack or bomb Sri because of a joke we made. And then they tell, they dropped us all. They put us on introspection, which meant we couldn't talk to or look at anybody. And that lasted at least a week. I'm not exactly sure how long that lasted. But they talked about pulling our graduations I was supposed to graduate about a month later.

Narrator: *Sometimes students would participate in feedback circles, with other members of the SRA community, where students were encouraged to give “feedback” to their peers.*

Sonja: We had these things called feedback, which maybe you've heard of, we had a lingo for it, too. Like, when you I feel was what we always had to say it was like, um, “when you do this, I choose to feel” so we even had like verbiage that they printed out for us on pieces of paper of like how we need to go about this feedback. And feedback turned into this power struggles. So like feedback was originally, I don't know if their intentions was it were good, but it just turned into this toxic environment of like, “Ooh, I'm feeling insecure about myself in my program. So, I'm going to start giving everybody else feedback to seem like I'm working my program and I'm doing well.” So like, there was like one girl who just like was in like incessant about like giving me feedback all the time. Like, “oh, Sonja, can I give you feedback?” And you have to ask first, “oh, can I give you feedback?” And then the person can say yes or no. And if but if you say no, you're not working your program. So, you have to say yes, and like, essentially. And then they just, like, tell you things that you're doing wrong.

L.C.: I am at a point today, where I got to this point there, but I still kind of hold this belief that in therapeutic settings, your peers should not be providing you with feedback, or anything of the sort. I think it veers too far into putting therapy in the hands of people who need to be receiving therapy. I think it can be incredibly dangerous because, you know, we're all like young girls, we don't always know what we're saying. And, you know, it can be very harmful. You know, because a lot of times, it feels like, we jokingly called them attack circles. And it got really petty; I don't think it therapeutically helped anyone.

Jaci: They wanted you to snitch on other girls. And it wasn't just constructive feedback. And they made us answer, “thank you for caring about me,” after the feedback, even if it was like bad feedback, you had to say “thank you for caring about me.” Meaning like, what they were saying was right or true. Like you couldn't be like, “Oh, no, not true.”

Outro music

Narrator: *Next episode on Troubled Treatment, we explore so called “WWASP therapies” at Spring Ridge. From links to a former so-called “cult,” to an alternative addiction treatment program and more, how did therapeutic boarding school treatment develop and is it effective for adolescents?*

Thanks for listening to episode 1 of Troubled Treatment. For transcripts, documents, additional information and more visit our page, linked in the show description.

Episode 3 “Action”

A warning to listeners: This episode contains mature content, including strong language, descriptions of trauma and mental illness, which may be disturbing to some listeners. Please listen with care.

Intro Music

Narrator: Previously on Troubled Treatment, we learned more about some of the former students at SRA and what their day-to-day experiences looked like. We also discussed the structure of the therapeutic program and how it affected those participating. This episode, more about the workshops required for graduation, their alternative and potentially problematic origins, as well as the complex backgrounds of the people who brought them to SRA.

Music fades

Jaci: It's a meditation, and you're on a nice cruise with many people from all over the world, and you represent your country or whatever. And it's, like I'm saying, it's a beautiful meditation, you're lying on the floor, open body language, and then I don't know where all the staffers that are staffing scream at the same time, like genies, palagi. And then. So, it's like, it's pretty shocking, it sounds stupid. But it's really shocking, after like, an intensive day of like, therapy and the night before, barely any sleep, because we have to do so much homework for it. So that happens. And then you have one minute to come, I mean, to stand up and explain why you should live. And then you make you go around every single one of your friends. And they tell you, you have three lives to give to somebody, including you. So, one of them is for you. And to the rest of the people, you just have to tell them that you die like you die and if I didn't say it loud enough, I just say like, they were like “louder,” “like, you die, you die, you die.”

Narrator: The activity you just heard described is referred to as lifeboat by former Spring Ridge students. It's an activity that almost everyone I spoke with mentioned because of its intensity. Workshops with activities like lifeboat, though, were mandatory to move up phases as part of the therapeutic program at Spring Ridge. They are also frequently described in many Breaking Code Silence testimonies as the most traumatic part of the program. So, let's break down exactly what they looked like:

Music

Last episode we talked about the four phases at Spring Ridge that all students had to move through to graduate, each lasting several months. Similar to the phases, students had four workshops required during their time at SRA: Challenge, Action, Results and Commitment. Each intensive workshop lasted multiple days and consisted of several exercises meant to break participants down before building them back up.

One of the exercises in challenge brought up to me several times was the towel beating exercise. Students were led into a dark room, before sitting down and listening to a guided meditation. Steph and Molly described what the exercise was like during their times at SRA.

Steph: Like the they had us the one that every girl I know, like, we'll still talk about is turning off all the lights having all the chairs set up with these fucking towels rolled up and saying oh, imagine like, whether it's like you know, some girls like your dad or like your uncle or whatever your mom whatever it was, was like an abuser in some way. Like, oh, imagine they're in that chair now beat the shit out of them while you scream. And I'm not even joking. Like you. It's, it's dark as hell. You can I mean, I had my eyes open because I was like, I want to see what these people are all really doing. You were supposed to have your eyes closed. But, and you just hear like scrapes. Some people are like guttural screaming and some people are just, ah, you know, like all around the room and then just mixed with like the sound of like, these towels beating on metal chairs.

Molly: Many of my fellow survivors collapsed because of extreme physical exertion after being screamed at for a long time to go harder. I remember being yelled at personally for a while because I wasn't crying. And I guess you're supposed to be doing that. So, I was called out humiliated.

Narrator: *Students at SRA had to complete each workshop before moving on to the next. If you were told your participation was unsatisfactory, you could be asked to leave which meant remaining in the program longer until you were able to complete the workshop.*

L.C.: A lot of times getting asked to leave was a very harrowing experience. At the time, you could not graduate SRA without going through the workshops. So, you know, every time you were asked to leave, it delayed your therapeutic process, you also couldn't move up phase systems. So, they had a one through four phase system, which basically showed was supposed to show how long your therapeutic how far along in your therapeutic process you were, and also kind of granted you more privileges as the phases moved up.

Narrator: *If you made it to action, the first exercise began with a label.*

Jaci: The first thing that you have to do when you go through action is write down a nametag for you, it's the first activity. My name tag was something along the lines, like "I'm a disgusting blow-up doll" and Genie, the, the facilitator was like, "Oh, beautiful, perfect." Like it had to be

fucked up. It had to be something that you hated about yourself to later change it to something beautiful, like, I do another workshop, but it's just, it's just fucked, they got, I don't understand how it's therapeutic.

Transition music

Narrator: *The guided cruise meditation we heard described at the beginning of this episode also took place during action, where students were told there are a limited number of spots on the lifeboat, and they had to choose who lives and dies.*

Jaci: And this is, once again, I didn't realize how fucked up it was. Until later on, like, why, why do I have to tell it to my friend, you know, imagine not getting a single "you live." One of my close friends, a girl there went through action with her sister. And it was probably one of the most traumatic experiences for her because her sister told her like you die. And she just didn't understand why you know.

Narrator: *During another action exercise, participants voted on whether each student was a quote "giver" or "taker." If a student got too many votes for taker, they were asked to leave, according to former students. Towards the end of action, each participant stood up and reversed their nametag from the beginning, with a contract saying, "I am a _____ young woman, who _____." However, not everyone identified as a woman and if the statement was not deemed authentic enough, students risked being asked to leave. If accepted, students ripped up the name tag with the negative statement from the beginning of action.*

At the climax of action, students performed an exercise called "stretches," which many people I spoke with described. Shannon shared her experience with me when we talked.

Shannon Saul: And it's when you are basically assigned a character and you dress up in a costume and dance as that character. Basically, everyone is different. But so, like my first time through action, I got assigned Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, so they dress you up, like Dorothy, you're supposed to dance to this song like Dorothy and then give a speech on like coming home to yourself, and then dances yourself afterwards. But all they tell you is you're going to be dancing as Dorothy and giving a speech. So, they, basically the environment is you're in the big room on campus, all the lights are off. The girls who are stuffing the training, stand on chairs around the room and like a semi-circle and hold flashlights on you. So, it's kind of like a spotlight. I did my dance as Dorothy and my speech. And Jeannie said that I was doing great. And then she told me that I was going to take off the costume and dance as myself. So, you take off a costume, you're just wearing like a black leotard. And then they turn on a song, which was a dance as yourself. And I didn't really understand the distinction. I just like danced the same way as I did when I danced as Dorothy because I didn't really get what was going on. But they have told us beforehand, the girls in the semi-circle are supposed to stand up if they think you're

being authentic and sit down if they think you're not being authentic. All of the girls were standing at the end of my dance. And they all gave around, went around to give feedback that they thought like I really had a breakthrough and was being super authentic. And then Jeannie spoke, and they all changed their minds. She basically told me that I like had a broken through and I was faking it. And like I couldn't really access my authentic self. And then she told me that I could sit and watch how it's really supposed to be done. So, she had me sit there and watch a couple other people do their stretches, and then kicked me out. And what that meant for me practically is I couldn't move up to phase four for another six months until there was another action. So that meant I had to stay at SRA for another six months.

Molly: On the final day of that training, girls are blindfolded led down a dark hallway and forced into a dark room with chairs that they're forced to sit in. Their shoes and other accessories are removed without their consent. And staffers then massage the girls' arms and legs and shoulders with lotion again without their consent. When the blindfolds are removed staffers are in a tight formation in the center of the circle. And they're standing like statues holding candles with one lit candle. And the lit candle is passed to one person at a time while each participant states their personal contract.

Narrator: *You may have noticed the name Jeannie coming up in a lot of these conversations. Jeanine Courtney is the founder and longtime CEO of Spring Ridge Academy, establishing the program in 1997. Though Courtney stepped down as CEO in 2015, leaving the program to her son, Brandon Courtney, and his wife Suzanne, according to students she still helped run workshops and programming after retirement, with less of a regular presence on campus. However, Jeannie's legacy lasted, and it turns out much of SRA's structure and programming may have a lot to do with her past.*

Mysterious Music

Narrator: *On sun-soaked streets of 1970s California, the air is thick with the scent of freedom, rebellion, and the promise of endless possibilities. In this vibrant era, California was the epicenter of cultural revolution and social change. Amidst all this, a former insurance salesman turned motivational speaker, John Hanley, founded a quickly popularized self-improvement movement. Hanley's vision for Lifespring was to create a program that offered participants a transformative experience, empowering them to break through limitations, unlock their potential, and live more fulfilling lives. The program was structured as an intensive series of workshops and confrontational seminars, often held over weekends or in extended residential settings. Sound familiar?*

In 1978, a man named David Gilcrease attended a weekend Lifespring workshop he was gifted. When he returned home, he told his wife, Jeanine Courtney, that he recognized his flaws and shortcomings in their marriage, which was on the brink of collapse. His wife, the same Jeanine Courtney who founded SRA, then attended several Lifespring workshops as well at her husband's encouragement, according to her 2022 deposition. The next year, Jeannie took a position in enrollment for family workshops with Lifespring before eventually leaving in August of 1980. Her husband, David, also became involved as a primary Lifespring facilitator.

Lifespring's confrontational approach led to several allegations of psychological damage, breakdowns and even loss of life, as well as several lawsuits. Eventually, in the late 80s to early 90s, the organization ceased operations amidst declining participation after controversy and backlash and has since been classified as a cult.

But what does this all have to do with Spring Ridge and the Troubled Teen Industry?

At the beginning of the episode, we heard about the structure of the therapeutic program at Spring Ridge. The four levels, the accomplishing different tasks and workshops to progress. Both of these were prevalent in Lifespring operations, which had three phases and incorporated exercises targeting emotional release, feedback, role playing and more.

For example, exercises like Lifeboat or the chair beating and group feedback often called "attack circles" mirror several Lifespring practices. There are other programs like Synanon, an addiction recovery group, and WWASP which employ similar methodology.

Narrator: Shannon described to me how Jeannie seemed during her time at SRA.

Shannon: She was kind of like, the only way I can really describe her is like Oz in the Wizard of Oz, like the man behind the curtain she ran everything. But she wasn't super accessible. Like, if you wanted to have a conversation with her it was very intimidating, and like, usually rushed and like she didn't have a lot of time for you. But, in trainings she ran everything. And she, it seemed like she almost got off on humiliating people, and I definitely experienced some of that firsthand. But I think also just, the fact that you can't move forward in the program and eventually leave until you make it through those trainings, she really likes that power dynamic.

Narrator: Most students I spoke with described Jeannie as rather aloof as an administrator when it came to interacting with students on campus. However, if you caught her attention, it was often not good.

Sonja: So, if Jeannie, Jeannie will like float the courtyard in the community and like, you know, sometimes she'll never notice you. But she'll, she'll, at some point, find a way to notice you and to call you out in your year or two or three of being there. And when that happens, um, bless your soul, because instead of being put into your caseload, where you've got, you know, eight girls who are shaming you with your therapist, you're put into the whole community. So, we're brought into the APR, which is this all-purpose room, they call it the APR. And it's just this huge empty room that Jeannie uses for trainings. Huge, very, very, very empty room. And all the girls line up around the edges in a big circle against the wall, and he got like, 60-APR70 girls in there, and the genie comes in with the therapist, I mean, the whole community shows up for this. And then they bring one girl into the, into the center of the room, that they think it's a problem for some reason, or is doing something wrong or isn't working their program, and they set them in the middle and just have the whole community just go at them, just, I mean just tear them apart. And they just laughed, like crumpled on the floor, just feeling horrible about themselves. And then it carries in into the community afterwards, you know, it's like, no one's gonna sit with you at the table for lunch. And like, nobody wants to be your roommate, and nobody wants to be around you. And it wasn't even for things that they were doing wrong. It was because if we're seen with this person, we're not working our program, if we're seen trying to befriend this person, or hang out with this person will be seen it in alliance with their bad mindset, because there's something wrong with them.

Narrator: You may remember from the first episode when talking about WWASP schools that Jeannie also worked for Cross Creek Programs, a WWASP affiliated program which was shut down after allegations of abuse and mistreatment. She later went on to open SRA.

Cult Vault Maggie: But if you actually do any, like research into like, the WWASP programs, they're like, pretty much exactly the same. But they're not I was always told, and she always had, like, made it seem like they were that she had just dreamt them up and they were like, completely unique to her. And then like, it wasn't until recently that I realized, like, how many people went through very, very, very similar seminars with like really similar exercises and stuff involved.

Narrator: I reached out to Jeanine Courtney for comment while researching but did not receive a response.

When it comes to seminars, trainings and workshops, former SRA students described physical exertion, humiliation, and emotional manipulation raise the question, are these exercises

effective therapies for teenage girls and did they help with the issues they were meant to address? Next episode, on Troubled Treatment.

Steph: Like a lot of these people, you can tell it's performative. Like it's, you know, trying to get a leg up in the program, like get out faster, or just like genuinely are brainwashed, like, some girls were like that.

L.C.: I've never met a single person who has been like, ah, yeah, Spring Ridge Academy, like changed my life and I really believe in their program and like, right, like none of us ever fell for it. We just pretended that we did, because it was the fastest way to get out.

Outro music

Narrator: Thanks for listening to episode 3 of Troubled Treatment. For transcripts, documents, additional information and more visit our page, linked in the show description.

Episode 4 “Unsilenced”

Intro Music

L.C.: I think the number one thing that Spring Ridge taught me, because I don't think it helped me that much therapeutically. It did teach me how to pretend to be okay. It's still something I struggle with a lot today and I've started to open it open up about it with people in my life a little bit more. But, I am very good at creating a fake sense of vulnerability, of being like “I'm telling you everything, I'm an open book,” when the real things are kind of hidden and I'm only kind of giving you, you know, the things that are a little bit easier. And I think Spring Ridge definitely taught me that.

Narrator: *That was L.C., who we heard from in earlier episodes, who hoped to turn their mental health around at Spring Ridge. The feeling of performing in the therapeutic program to escape was shared by many of the former students I talked to, who felt that the easiest way to cope was pretending the SRA programming was working.*

L.C.: Very much the environment was like, push other people down to get ahead. Like, that's like kind of just what it turned into, to kind of the point where like, I stopped taking it personally, and

I kind of stopped feeling bad for doing it. And like I, I hate to admit that, and like I now feel bad for doing it. But at the time, it was like this is what I have to do to get out of this shitty situation.

Maggie: Everybody there kind of did what they needed to do to survive in that place. So like, I don't really fault anybody for, like, the way they acted while they were at SRA. Like everybody had to do what they needed to do there.

Narrator: *In addition to the direct feedback in groups, students could participate in what were often referred to as "FYIs," to report potentially negative behavior or dialogue to administration. However, many students described it as a way to get through the program faster.*

Sonja: It was this very anxiety provoking environment of "I need to impress my therapist, I need to throw everyone else under the bus," to try and get out. We even had these stations in the hallways there, in our dormitories that were called FYI stations. You walk into different parts of the hallways where they have this little cubby and it's in this box has a lock on it where you tell on other students feel like FYI, your information, so and so is doing this and then you can like either leave it anonymous, or you can sign it. And of course, everybody signs it because they're like, "look at me tattling on someone else, move me up a phase." And it was just this aggressive environment.

Steph: You know, like, being like, you will get ahead if you like, the more you report, the more you tell us like the more you're a little like bird in our ear for us, you know, like, the better you'll do like the shorter your stay is or the nicer you'll get treated or the more freedom you'll get like the less you'll need to be watched. It doesn't matter like they have all these little things you can give and take.

You're lucky if you find a couple of people who are still, you know, saying unreal, and like, trusting of you enough to be real with you. Because I was raised with a couple of people who weren't and like, it got me in hot water. And like, it was not good. So like, I don't know, it was all just very, like structured and like, deliberate. And like, I just learned to be very, like, keep to myself, like observe, you know, say neutral things, say general things like nod, smile, laugh with people, like, you know, just kind of do things to make it you learn how to work the system.

Narrator: *As a result, the culture of the school often felt hostile, with students unable to trust others, for fear of being dropped or penalized in the program. Many also found the curriculums and seminars to be more traumatizing than the issues they were hoping to work through, and often felt pushed to share information or act in a certain way during exercises.*

Molly: Lots of people who were sent there has suffered physical, sexual and emotional abuse prior to attending Spring Ridge Academy. And the program forced these traumas onto us again, like just using them against us, forcing us to admit that we lead to something happening by

forcing us to relive some of the most terrifying things that had ever happened in order to get us to admit our accountability and having something happened to us.

Maggie: I hadn't come to the point where I was like, I think, like, make like, I didn't feel like I had that much like crazy things to like, confess to basically because I didn't, I would have had to start like making things up. And at that point, like as well, I think to keep me there, they sort of invented that I was like a drug and alcohol like alcohol, I was an alcoholic and a drug addict.

Narrator: *Numerous students reported they developed other further issues while at Spring Ridge, especially in regards to food. Multiple former students I spoke with complained of rigid mealtimes and portions, restriction of snacks and continued weighing that contributed to body image issues and disordered eating.*

Molly: I knew several people that were there for eating disorders and SRA forced them to get weighed, which was not in a private setting every single week, which was horrible. I know a lot of people who were there after struggling with addiction, who were forced on medication, some addictive.

Narrator: *I was curious, how were things after students left Spring Ridge? What was it like adapting to "normal" life again? Did Spring Ridge's programming help with some of the existing issues many students experienced? Did it help or hurt family and personal relationships?*

L.C.: And I had while at Spring Ridge, I'd applied for colleges, I'd gotten in and was like going the following fall. So, it was kind of just like keeping the facade up until then, until I moved out and I went to college, and I kind of had the same thought of like, college is gonna be great and everything was gonna be fine. It was not like I was not my mental illnesses were like, not cured. They never can be cured, but I don't even think they were very well treated. I think they were just covered up in the facade that everything is okay. So, I ended up dropping out of college as well about a little over a year after I left Spring Ridge Academy. And that was really difficult. Because I ended up, you know, having to admit to my parents, like, you know, the last couple years of my life, like have been a lie. Like I haven't felt better, I haven't felt different. I've just gotten better at hiding it. And that, that for me was really the like, come to Jesus moment of like, "I have to turn my life around and like this did not fix it, like going to Spring Ridge did not fix it pretending to be okay did not fix it."

Sonja: Here's a really good way of describing it a really good way of describing it. You know, um, have you ever seen like, videos of wild animals being released, and then they kind of like, sit outside of this cage after it's been lifted? And they like, like, look around really nervously, but they're not running away. Yeah. And then, and then they fucking after, like, 10 minutes, they bolt. That's a very good way of describing what it felt like, of getting out. Like, I was very

scared. I'm felt very frozen, like, "Oh, my God, I'm like, being let out of this cage on Am I allowed to fucking run yet?" Like, can I get away from you people? And I took the freedom and ran with it, and I was so destructive to myself.

Narrative: Not all former students immediately felt resentful towards therapeutic programs after leaving, nor did they call their practices abusive. Several residents took years to remember experiences and recognize its impacts, including Meg, the former Montana program resident turned troubled teen industry critic. Before, quote, "waking up," as she refers to it, Meg even testified in the Montana state Senate against a regulatory bill that would hurt her former school.

Meg: I believe that our bodies don't let us open up and realize these things until we're ready. And I just didn't happen to be ready until I was like 33, or 34, or something like that. And one of my Chrysalis sisters committed suicide. And that was really, when it was like, "Whoa, was I abused?" You know, and I even have one of my, one of my best friends from, from Chrysalis. I remember talking to her and asking her at that point after she died. And I was like, "Was that okay? Like, that what we went through?" And she was like, "No, it's abuse." And I'm like, "what?" I'm like, "Why didn't you tell me?" She's like, "I've been waiting for you to be ready." Because like, I wasn't, I wasn't ready.

Narrator: After "waking up," Meg worked for another survivor advocacy organization before co-founding Unsilenced, a nonprofit that helps support former troubled teen industry survivors advocate for themselves. They offer legal assistance, lobby for regulation of the industry and offer a platform to gather information about programming.

Meg: So, you know, that's when we really took a hard pivot into the direct advocacy efforts, that's when we started our independence packs and start sending backpacks out to homeless teens. I mean, that's when we really started serving the community. And that's something that's extremely important to me. And it's the other advocacy organization that I've mentioned, it's I noticed it was never about the community. In fact, I, to be honest, I've heard so many negatives about the community that it scared me into believing the community was like the scary like a creature that's going to come and attack me. But it's so important to give back. And I'm you know; I make it it's our internal mission at unsilenced is to help survivors help themselves.

Narrator: Some of the other former students from SRA also wanted to help others share their experiences, starting the @BreakingCodeSilenceSRA account that I came across on Instagram when I first heard about the program. The three former students posted anonymous submitted testimonies, emails, screenshots, documents and more, in hopes of empowering former students and raising awareness.

Sonja Not just rant about, like, my personal feelings, but like, genuinely speak on, what is it that makes these programs fail? One, you can't force anybody to change. You can't, especially not a kid who you've adopted and shoved into a program, where you're just forcing them into a mold that you think is right for them. They'll immediately go into like a mental survival mode with the desperation to get out of this program. So yeah, of course, we see all these phase fours who are “working” their program. And like, they seem very pro Jeannie pro program. You know, “I'm so Pro, the workshops, and I just love everything here.” And like, it's in like, my opinion, like a sense of “I have groomed myself to accept this program, because that's what I need to do to get out.”

Transition music

Narrator: Though more former students are now speaking out about their experiences now through Breaking Code Silence, many say they struggled to communicate with their own parents, both in the program and after leaving. Not only was it difficult to communicate frequently or openly with family, but the program's marketing and communications sought to widen this gap.

During their first months at SRA, students only had one phone call per week with family, monitored in a room with a staff member while on speakerphone.

Molly: You were not allowed to talk about anything bad that was going on one time, I started to talk about a shame circle where I was in the center of it, I was in the center of several, they ended my phone call and told me that if I shared anything negative again, they would revoke my phone calls with my parents entirely. I did not want to lose those. We were also allowed to write home. But the people in charge read every letter that we wrote, and they refused to send it if it mentioned anything negative, or mentioned any of the stuff that they were doing.

Narrator: Even when some students did mention negative experiences or make complaints about the school to parents, they were often not believed. They thought it was natural coming from a student sent to a boarding school against their will, after all, who wouldn't exaggerate in order to come home? This was a point that the administration capitalized on.

Molly: My parents were horrified to find out what was going on in this program, as where many of my friends' parents, but with all the communication, monitoring, and in some cases, communication completely restricted. The parents had no idea how bad it really was. Parents are taught from these programs not to believe their children.

Meg: Parents will always be worried. Parents will always worry if what they're doing isn't right. And guess what, most parents will always do whatever it takes to help their kids. Now, they use

that, they use the fear mongering, and that creates the industry. Parents, because I guarantee you there are parents out there that thought they would never send their kids to that facility. But guess what, if you get scared enough? You might.

Narrator: It wasn't difficult to convince parents to keep their children in these programs. Many families were in difficult situations and had genuine concern for their child's wellbeing. Often times, a therapeutic program seemed like the most logical and helpful solution. Some programs, like SRA, were able to monetize this fear, promoting their program as the best solution.

L.C.: I had a conversation with both my parents about it. And my dad was very, like, apologetic and had kind of been like "I'm super sorry that we ever like did that to you. We just didn't know what else to do." And I was like I get it right like not I don't harbor the resentment for them sending me there to me because they like that they were duped by the like, you know, SRA dream and message of like, we're going to fix your child. Like I think they were victims in that too my mom, however, is still very like, "I'm so sad Spring Ridge shut down and like it was a great place and it helped a lot of girls." Like, no it didn't. She didn't really ever get that message even after I like came out and was like, you know, this was actually really bad.

Narrator: However, one parent of a former student did listen, and she pushed back, filing suit against the school.

Mysterious Music

Kimberly Sweidy, whose daughter first attended Spring Ridge Academy in 2019, described the bureaucratic nightmare of trying to withdraw her daughter, and criticizes the program's origins and practices. Sweidy, a practicing lawyer herself, filed suit in January of 2021 against SRA, and eight of its administrators and employees, including Jeanine Courtney and her son Brandon Courtney, who became CEO after her departure. Sweidy alleged fraud, breach of contract, breach of good faith and fair dealing, racketeering, negligence and infliction of emotional distress.

Narrator: But the facility closed in August of 2023, the judge dismissed all claims except for claims of fraud against SRA and former admissions officer Kate Deily. Sweidy's remaining claims go to trial starting May 28, 2024, at the Federal District Court in Phoenix, Arizona.

After attempting to rebrand under the name New Day Rising, Spring Ridge Academy closed in spring of 2023. Former students posted online and shared the news, celebrating the school's closure. Hundreds of comments flooded the BreakingCodeSilence page.

Music

Student 1: This place was literally hell on Earth. So happy girls won't have to fall victim to it anymore

Student 2: Rest in powerlessness SRA, you will not be missed.

Student 3: Another one down, let's not stop until there's not one of these places left.

Student 4: Thank you all so much, you saved so many people by having the courage to speak up. At the time I couldn't do it, but I am so grateful you guys did and am forever grateful for y'all.

Narrator: *For many, seeing Spring Ridge close its doors was validating and satisfying. What about all the similar programs? Is the Breaking Code Silence movement affecting other programs the same way? And what happens to those who run them after they close? Next episode we wrap up our journey through the troubled teen industry and take a look at what advocates think is next.*

Thanks for listening to episode 4 of Troubled Treatment. For transcripts, documents, additional information and more visit our page, linked in the show's description.

Episode 5 “Phase 5”

Intro music

Narrator: *You're listening to the final episode of Troubled Treatment, a series investigating a therapeutic boarding school for teens in Arizona, and the larger industry of similar programs that continues to receive backlash over its practices. Throughout the series we've heard from former students and advocates about their experiences at Spring Ridge Academy up until its closure, but what happens next? This last episode I'll share my experience visiting campus in Arizona and we'll explore what advocates hope will change in addressing adolescent behavioral health.*

Transition music

Car driving and turn signal audio from AZ, door opening and closing

Narrator: *It's an unusually cold January day in Arizona, with biting wind and whisperings of white on the desert floor from a recent snow. In the small town of Spring Valley, I stand outside my rental car facing the small campus making up Spring Ridge Academy.*

Though the school had permanently closed by the time I began this project, I had to see the campus for myself ... Where it was, what it looked like, I wanted to imagine the dozens of girls who were brought there with no idea where they were going or how long they would be here.

Audio describing campus and first impressions while in Arizona

Looking at the vast, hilly and shrubby desert outside the barbed wire surrounding campus, I could see why it was so difficult to run away. Where would you go?

Audio trying to buzz in

No one answered my call at the gate, so I just drove around the campus. Nearby, I spotted two women talking in a front yard. I stopped to ask if they knew much about the school. Though I didn't record our conversation, one shared with me that a relative had worked at the school briefly, and she thought it a shame that it closed. But I was then shocked when she claimed that the owners were trying to reopen the school, allegedly hoping to be able to keep students past age 18. Though I tried and was unable to independently confirm whether this was true, I did notice something...

While doing a quick Google search writing this very script in the spring, I suddenly noticed Spring Ridge Academy's website pop up in the results. After the school closed, the webpage was temporarily archived, and I had not been able to view its original contents for months. However, now in March, the website was back up, with information about programming, therapy and lifestyle at the school. Although I've unsuccessfully tried to talk with Spring Ridge administrators, the website's advertisement was proof positive that it may just be gesturing to a new chapter.

Transition music

While looking online, it appears that several staff members have found employment in other similar behavioral health programs after Spring Ridge's closing. Suzanne Courtney, daughter-in-law of SRA founder Jeannie Courtney and former admissions director is currently working with a male-targeted therapeutic wilderness program, BacktoBasics Outdoor Adventure Recovery, according to her LinkedIn profile. Another former admissions officer named in Ms. Sweidy's lawsuit, Kate Deily, lists her current job as a director of business development at Solstice Residential Treatment Center, a female residential facility in Utah advertising similar services as Spring Ridge.

Given this morphing network of programs, I wanted to know what its critics proposed to improve the system. I asked former troubled teen school student and advocate Meg Applegate, who we heard from before, what she thinks needs to be done to effectively help teenagers struggling with issues therapeutic programs are meant to address.

Meg: I believe that regulation reporting and oversight needs to be increased in the facilities to be able to create safer places for youth right now. Right? I think that we cannot have an industry that isn't regulated in the same way that any other health industry is regulated, and mental health is health. And health should always be guided by outcomes. And if survivors are going into facilities and leaving calling themselves survivors, that is a sign that something's not right. If there was a population of people entering a hospital or an ER and leaving calling themselves survivors, that hospital wouldn't exist. We need to extend the exact same regulations as hospitals have to these facilities. They are holding youth.

Narrator: By the numbers, outcomes right now don't look positive. A study through the Baylor College of Medicine and the Menninger Clinic in Texas found that of 379 respondents who experienced institutionalization in childhood, 15 people reported finding it helpful. Of the 175 who attended a therapeutic boarding school like SRA, 5 said they found it helpful, while 135 said it was unhelpful. 19 were undecided. If at least 77% of those who attend therapeutic boarding schools find it unhelpful or even damaging, what needs to change?

Meg: So like, it's affecting such a large part of this population, that people don't realize that it actually does affect them... I think a good sign of people waking up to that is the fact that legislators are paying attention. And you know, Senator Murray, Senator Wyden launched that federal investigation back in June of 2022, I think. Did anything come of it? No. But that's the kind of stuff we need, right? That's why Unsilenced, both figuratively, and you know, physically are going to be the game changers, right, speaking up, and telling your story loud and proud. And then also our organization that's helping connect survivors to advocates and attorneys and things like that.

Narrator: The legislators Meg mentioned refer to a 2022 letter written by Senators Murray and Wyden and addressed to several large healthcare networks that detail concerns about therapeutic adolescent treatment and demands answers to the widespread allegations of abuse. Meg and other advocates see awareness as a step in the right direction toward regulation and accountability, though she notes the difficulty of pressing legal consequences in our conversation.

Meg: Especially in Utah, which is where I do a lot is you can't the statutes are really bad unless something really bad happens to you... When you look at the authorities in charge of doing stuff, not much happens. But yeah, so usually, unless historically, it's a sexual assault or an egregious medical neglect, medical neglect is huge.

Narrator: *For now, advocates like Meg and the students participating in breaking code silence through digital content or legal action are finding support from those who share similar experiences in a troubled treatment industry.*

Transition music

If you are interested in exploring more about the workings of the troubled teen industry, there are several other explanatory documentaries and investigations available about boarding schools and wilderness programs, including Hell Camp and The Program on Netflix, and This is Paris, among others. The Program, which aired on Netflix in 2024, investigates a boarding school similar to SRA and further explains the role of Jeannie's former husband, David Gilcrease, in WWASP and the development of similar programs.

Outro music

Thanks for listening to the final episode of Troubled Treatment. I want to thank everyone who contributed to this project in both extremely big and small ways. Thank you to all of my interviewees who bravely and vulnerably shared their experiences and expertise with me and who told their story for others to hear. Thank you to all those who helped gather hundreds of documents that I would never have been able to access on my own. Thank you especially to my advisor Dr. Elizabeth Hendrickson, who provided invaluable guidance, feedback and support throughout this process, and who always kept me sane when I felt overwhelmed. Thank you to all my friends and family who were kind sounding boards for over a year as I talked over and over about this project.