

California Christian School Alleged to Be Conversion Therapy Nightmare

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Several students who attended River View Christian Academy, a boarding school for troubled teens in Temecula, Calif., say they were punished for coming out as gay an bisexual, reports *Buzzfeed News*. The punishments included being forbidden to have physical contact with anyone for months at a time, running laps, and other humiliating practices like forcing them to exclusively eat peanut butter sandwiches for weeks.

Emilie Bachrach, who attended River View from August 2005 to March 2007, said she was strip-searched upon arrival and barred from conversing with anyone for her first week. Her 40 classmates were not allowed to speak or look at her in the institution's attempt to use the Bible to help troubled teen girls, she said.

When Bachrach, then 15, befriended 17-year-old Rosemary Donahue, staff forbid the two to interact, claiming their relationship was "preventing our progress in the program," Donahue said. If they spoke to or looked at each other, they were penalized in a point system that awarded students privileges, including graduation.

"I didn't come out as queer for 10 years because of it," Donahue told *Buzzfeed News*. Another student, who was not identified by name in the article, was placed on a similar "no touch" regimen and said she was told "flesh would burn off my skin repeatedly for eternity in hell because I was gay." After eight months of no physical contact with anyone, she said, she shrieked the first few times she was hugged after coming home from River View.

Despite the accusations that they use alarming methods, schools like River View are barely regulated.

"Whether they're straight, gay, it doesn't matter -- these programs use the same methodologies on straight kids who are rebellious," Jodi Hobbs, who runs Survivors of Institutional Abuse, a group that advocates from the alumni of these troubled teens programs, told *Buzzfeed News*.

In response to such programs, Democratic State Sen. Ricardo Lara sponsored legislation to enhance state oversight of troubled teen institutions. Lara was inspired by meeting with River View survivor Rebecca Lopez, who identifies as gay and was sent to the facility in 2011, when she was 14.

At River View, Lopez said, she spent months forbidden to have any physical contact in the facility's attempt to keep her from being gay. She told *Buzzfeed News* that seven years later still she flinches when someone touches her because she has been conditioned to feel she's "doing something wrong."

"This was another attempt to skirt around the conversion therapy law," she said.

California bans troubled teen facilities from acting as conversion therapy camps. However, it's unclear yet if Lara's legislation, which has become law, will apply to so-called alternative boarding schools like River View.

River View confirmed it has no licensed teachers, nurses, or psychiatrists or therapists on payroll in a phone interview with *Buzzfeed News*. Even its medical manager has no medical education beyond basic first aid training.

Although the state has a law that obligates staff to report to authorities when a student says they've experienced physical or sexual abuse, eight students have come forward and claimed that River View staff failed to do so.

River View founder Phil Ludwig has cast doubt on students' claims in the past.

"Unfortunately, when you're doing a program like this with kids, we know what they really are doing and it's manipulation, but the laws don't back us up," he said on his radio show in 2016.

He told *Buzzfeed News* there has never been an official accusation of misconduct on the part of the River View staff, and he denied that the school practices conversion therapy, although he did acknowledge he believes being gay is wrong.

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