



ARIZONA

EDUCATION

'It was a cult': Traumatizing troubled teens

An Arizona facility for troubled teens was just hit with a \$2.5 million judgment for fraud

BY: **JEROD MACDONALD-EVOY** - JULY 15, 2024 7:15 AM

Photo via Getty Images



Outside the small town of Mayer, Arizona, 14-year-old Katie Farran and other teenage girls were engaging in a ritual they had done many times before.

At the Spring Ridge Academy, Farran and others gathered in a room for "Feedback Group," a pseudo-group therapy that involves shouting grievances at other participants.

The teenage girls were encouraged to participate, told they needed to have things to say to their peers, who were there for reasons ranging from substance abuse, eating disorders or simply being victims of bad parenting.

"It was something you had to do," Farran, now 39, said in an interview with the Arizona Mirror. "It was really

humiliating to be called out in front of everybody.”

This style of “therapy” was born in the late 1950s, connected to a group known to many as a cult and connected to a string of crimes [including attempted murder](#).

This story deals with child abuse. If you or a loved one is experiencing abuse please call 1-888-SOS-CHILD

Now Spring Ridge Academy is facing legal repercussions after a mother of one of those teenagers filed a federal lawsuit claiming fraud, among other things, and a jury awarded her \$2.5 million. But for survivors of Spring Ridge Academy and similar facilities for so-called troubled teens, the victory is just one small step towards greater accountability.

But Spring Ridge Academy, which closed in 2023, is just one part of a larger ecosystem, one that continues to use outdated therapies and procedures born out of a cult from the 1950s. And it’s one that still has roots in Arizona.

“It is easy for people to kind of overlook us and think, ‘Oh, they were just kids,’ or especially, ‘Oh, they were just messed up kids,’ and not take us seriously,” Farran said. “I hope that people start listening.”

From cult to therapy

In 1958, Charles “Chuck” Dederich created Synanon, a drug rehabilitation program intended to combat the rising heroin addictions of the era.

By the late 1960s, the group was attracting media attention and building a fanbase in Hollywood, culminating in [a feature film](#) starring Chuck Connors and Edmond O’Brien, filmed at their actual headquarters in Santa Monica.

Synanon began making Dederich [\\$10 million a year](#) as its popularity grew. At the heart of the program was something called “[The Game](#).”

The Game was presented as a therapeutic tool, a form of group therapy in which members humiliated each other and were encouraged to expose each other’s weaknesses and flaws.

The Game is a form of “[attack therapy](#),” a treatment that [studies](#) have since found leads to lasting psychological damage. Its efficacy

even in the short term is questionable, as other research concluded it even drove some [alcoholics to drink more](#). As Synanon grew, so did the group's control over those in its care.

By the 1970s, women in Synanon were required to [shave their heads](#), married couples were forced to break up and find new partners, men were given [forced vasectomies](#) and some pregnant women were given abortions against their will.

As Synanon grew, so did its legal troubles. Dederich ordered two of his followers to assassinate a critic – the rattlesnake they planted in the man's mailbox bit him, but he survived – and there were violent assaults against members and those who wanted to free loved ones from Synanon's grasp. The final nail in the coffin for the organization came in the 1990s, when the Internal Revenue Service revoked its tax-exempt status, ordering the organization to pay \$17 million in back taxes.

Dederich was no longer at the helm after the attempted murder, which landed him probation. Bankrupt and without a leader, Synanon dissolved in 1991.

But its legacy remained.

Other groups popped up in its place, using similar tactics. Former followers branched off into different industries and soon a whole industry would emerge based on many of its initial teachings.

The Troubled Teen Industry

It was December 2003 and Nora Ash was about to experience something called "[gooning](#)."

Gooning is a form of legal kidnapping utilized by what is colloquially referred to as the "Troubled Teen Industry," or TTI for short. Big men show up at your house, often in the middle of the night, and whisk you away without telling you anything.

Ash was taken from her home in Salt Lake City to a place called Outback Wilderness in the middle of nowhere Utah. The state was [being hit by a blizzard](#) that would eventually claim the lives of five people.

At Outback Wilderness, there was nine feet of snow on the ground at a facility that aimed to teach kids "self reliance." In order to have the privilege to eat, the teenagers first had to make a spoon from scratch, Ash said.

Due to the storm, she was unable to get the things necessary to make her spoon for a day and a half.

Ash, who was 16 at the time, was sent to Outback Wilderness by her parents because she had interest in an older boy. Like many teenagers, she also snuck the occasional drink or smoked marijuana, something she shared with many of the teens sent to TTI facilities.

Outback Wilderness was a [type of camp](#) that is popular in the troubled teen industry. The “troubled teens” are forced to live in a wilderness setting, something sold to parents as a “tough love” solution for their teens.

Arizona has its own wilderness programs. Some have even had their own time in the limelight.

Family vloggers Ruby Franke and Jodi Hildebrandt were [sentenced earlier this year to prison for child abuse](#). But before Franke’s children were taken away from the abuse, they were [being sent to Anasazi](#), a wilderness program based out of Mesa.

The wilderness programs follow similar programs as those in Synanon and other troubled teen groups.

“Most kids get put in programs because they have trauma somewhere that wasn’t addressed earlier on,” Ash said. She now [spends her time advocating](#) against these facilities and trying to steer parents away from sending their kids to them.

“Just about every TTI program is centered on Synanon practices,” Ash said.

In 1999, Farran was learning just what those practices were while at Spring Ridge Academy. Just before going there, she was at a wilderness program and had been told she’d be going home, only to discover she had been sent to the Mayer facility instead.

“It was absolutely devastating, because I never knew exactly how long I was going to be there,” Farran said of the transition from one facility to the next. Many of the programs say they will last between six and nine months, but survivors share similar stories of aging out of the programs.

Lifeboats and duct taped towels

One of the exercises that many survivors tell is of [taking towels](#) wrapped in duct tape and hitting them against chairs. Many times,

the teens are asked to imagine what they're angry at or pretend that they're hitting their parents. The exercise was sometimes coupled with days-long "retreats" where the teens would engage in other activities, including one Farran remembers vividly from Spring Ridge Academy.

It started with a meditation and visuals of a serene journey on a cruise ship. It was a moment of calm for the teens as they listened to calming music and imagined a different life.

Then the sirens and flashing lights started.

"It jolts you out of it and scares the crap out of you," Farran said.

Suddenly, everyone was being told the fictional cruise ship they were on was sinking and there were not enough lifeboats for everyone. Each teen got one minute to say why they deserved to live.

Those who didn't use the whole minute were chastised for not thinking highly of themselves.

But those who used their whole minute? Well, they must be selfish.

Now the teens had to vote on who in the room would live and who would be left to die on the sinking ship and why, often looking a crying friend in the face as they did so.

The lifeboat exercise was just one of the many different kinds of "therapies" that Farran experienced during her tenure at Spring Ridge Academy. She also experienced the "feedback groups," in which teens as well as the adults involved in the program would [shout their grievances](#) at one another in a style similar to Synanon's game.

"This is why you're a piece of sh—, but in a veiled way like you are caring," Ash said of how they were told to participate in these group attack therapy days.

Many of the facilities also give the teens different "levels" that offer them varying privileges. Farran recalled being told she needed to give more feedback if she ever hoped to rise higher in the Spring Ridge Academy ranks.

"It was a cult in itself," Farran said of Spring Ridge Academy. And at the head of that cult in Mayer was a woman named Jeannie Courtney.

Repeated investigations

Courtney founded Spring Ridge Academy. Her ex-husband is a man named David Gilcrease.

Gilcrease was a facilitator for a group called [LifeSpring](#), which was created in 1974. Some have described it as a pyramid scheme, while others described it as a cult. Ginni Thomas, the wife of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, [was once a member](#) who began [crusading against cults](#) after leaving.

Although Courtney and Gilcrease divorced in 1988, the two often worked together doing LifeSpring seminars until the mid-1990s.

Spring Ridge Academy eventually became Courtney's main focus. She counted among her employees her son and daughter-in-law, as well as Gilcrease's new wife.

"Not only did they use cult-like practices, but she was this figurehead," Farran said, adding that Courtney had an "inner circle" of teen girls who often got special privileges. "I wanted her to approve of me so desperately. That was my driving goal."

That desire to make Courtney happy led Farran to fully dedicate herself to the program. She described Courtney as charismatic, but with a "very high school mean girl" attitude – someone who would be nice or mean at a moment's notice.

Towards the end of her stay, the veil began to slip for Farran.

She had worked to try to reach the "honor code," which gave teens extra privileges. Farran had done absolutely everything she had needed to do, but Courtney still wouldn't let her into the "inner circle."

"That kind of opened my eyes a little bit," Farran said. She tried to tell her parents in her letters home, but those were read by staff and her phone calls were always monitored. Her parents also made it very clear that she would not be leaving anytime soon.

Farran's story is similar to the one told by Kimberly Sweidy, the mother who successfully sued Spring Ridge Academy for fraud.

In [her 200-plus-page lawsuit](#), Sweidy describes much of the same type of abuse and manipulation seen by former Spring Ridge Academy residents. Sweidy tried to get her daughter back from the

program, only to have the program go around her to her ex-husband to ensure her daughter stayed.

Sweidy and her family were paying Spring Ridge Academy \$9,000 a month in tuition.

Spring Ridge Academy was the focus of several investigations by the Arizona Department of Health Services during the 16 years it was open. It officially closed its doors in 2023, however, Courtney has filed for a business license for what appears to be a [new program in Prescott](#).

Courtney and Spring Ridge Academy's attorney did not respond to a request for comment or a request for an interview for this story.

The Arizona Department of Health Services cited the facility for lacking critical documentation and not preventing a teen from trying to commit suicide.

"I don't have a plan and I think about it 66% of the time," the teen said in an assessment form [reviewed by ADHS](#). The form also noted that the teen had said they had been "cutting ankles, wrist, hip with whatever sharp thing I find in the moment."

The teen attempted suicide multiple times. Another teen resident at Spring Ridge Academy told ADHS investigators that the suicidal teen had told multiple people they had intended to kill themselves.

In total, the department found two administrative violations, two medication service violations, two emergency and safety standard violations, one opioid prescribing violation, two quality management violations, two environmental standards violations and two behavioral health services violations.

Life after

The troubled teen industry has been facing intense scrutiny. Last month, socialite [Paris Hilton](#) told a congressional committee her stories of abuse within the system. And multiple documentary films have been drawing more eyes to the industry than ever before.

But what of those still inside and those who may have gotten out of a place like Spring Ridge Academy or Outback Wilderness?

"Keep your head down, do what they say until you get out," Farran said to those who may still be in a place like Spring Ridge Academy.

“Know that it will be OK and there is a whole community that will support you.”

Many survivors, including Farran and Ash, have found comfort in the communities online that have grown out of the troubled teen industry. They share their traumas, give advice for how to move on and advocate for change in the industry.

Farran said that the trauma of a place like that can be hard to shake. She recalled a business trip she took where she felt she had to ask permission to leave the hotel, a reminder of her days at Spring Ridge Academy.

For Ash, it’s about not only educating parents but trying to reach workers on the inside who may think they’re doing right by the children but are just a part of a “larger machine.”

“By the time they see what is actually going on, they stay ’cause they feel they are the only way to prevent what is happening to these kids,” Ash said of some of the workers she’s spoken to.

Both Farran and Ash also stress the importance of not forgetting those who have died at these facilities.

In Arizona, there have been [multiple deaths](#) attributed to troubled teen facilities, along with shocking [footage of abuse](#).

But survivors are more hopeful than ever that real change may be coming, whether that be through legislation that prevents “[gooning](#)” or by more people becoming aware of the situations at some of these facilities.

However, the industry has been fighting back.

The lobbying arm of many of these organizations, the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, or NATSAP, has been [pushing legislation](#) in states across the nation. Two NATSAP-backed bills that were passed and [signed into law this year by Gov. Katie Hobbs](#).

Spring Ridge Academy and other local TTI facilities are a part of NATSAP, and Courtney was previously on its board of directors.

Sweidy said she could not speak for this story, citing the ongoing litigation against Spring Ridge Academy and others. Farran and Ash both cited the recent jury verdict against Spring Ridge Academy as a major win for survivors of these facilities across the country.

“Somebody saw that things were not right and a jury saw that things weren’t right and it is ok to feel the way that I feel,” Farran said.

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Reporter Jerod MacDonald-Evoy joined the Arizona Mirror from the Arizona Republic, where he spent 4 years covering everything from dark money in politics to Catholic priest sexual abuse scandals. He brings strong watchdog sensibilities and creative storytelling skills to the Arizona Mirror. Arizona Mirror is part of States Newsroom, the nation's largest state-focused nonprofit news organization.

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