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Inside the 'troubled teen' school so disturbing it still gives ex-students nightmares

It's still open, just under a different name



by Harry Shukman

'I've been in and out of therapy for the past 10 years now. Nightmares, night terrors. My husband still wakes me up having nightmares. It's been really bad. Depression, anxiety – I was diagnosed with PTSD.'

Kids who went to Carolina Springs Academy, a "behavior modification" school in South Carolina, call themselves survivors for

a reason. They think the facility, run by a man named Narvin Lichfield, was a fucking horror.

Based in a rural backwater in the northwest of the state, the school's name has changed over the years, but it is currently called Southern Oaks Therapeutic Boarding School. Its website offers a wholesome snapshot of horse riding, farm work and classroom learning. But students sent by their parents to attend the $50,000-a-year program when it was called Carolina Springs told *babe* their time there was deeply traumatic and still haunts them as adults.



A screengrab of Southern Oaks' site

Southern Oaks is the latest operation run by Narvin Lichfield, a man whose schools have been faced with repeated reports of physically and emotionally abusing kids under the guise of correcting chronic misbehavior. Back in 2003, one of Lichfield's programs in Costa Rica was shut down after authorities heard reports that children were beaten and restrained. Kids rioted in protest of the conditions, leading to a raid by local authorities. They found punishments at the school involved physical and mental abuse, and conditions were so overcrowded kids were made to sleep on the ground. A 17-year-old

boy said he was beaten by a teacher with a stick after refusing to sign a statement saying he was well treated, according to the New York Times.

Lichfield has run schools at the same site in Donalds, SC under different names. Over the years, it has been called Carolina Springs, Seneca Ranch, and Second Chance Ranch. It is now called Southern Oaks, and there are kids there right now. When we posed as a parent concerned that our teen daughter was kissing girls and smoking too much weed, Lichfield said we could get a spot because a girl had just left.

And he told me if my daughter misbehaves he would punish her. "If she lies to me in any form, we're really gonna nail her."

Some people will wonder how a man with his record is still being entrusted with the care of minors. They would be right to.

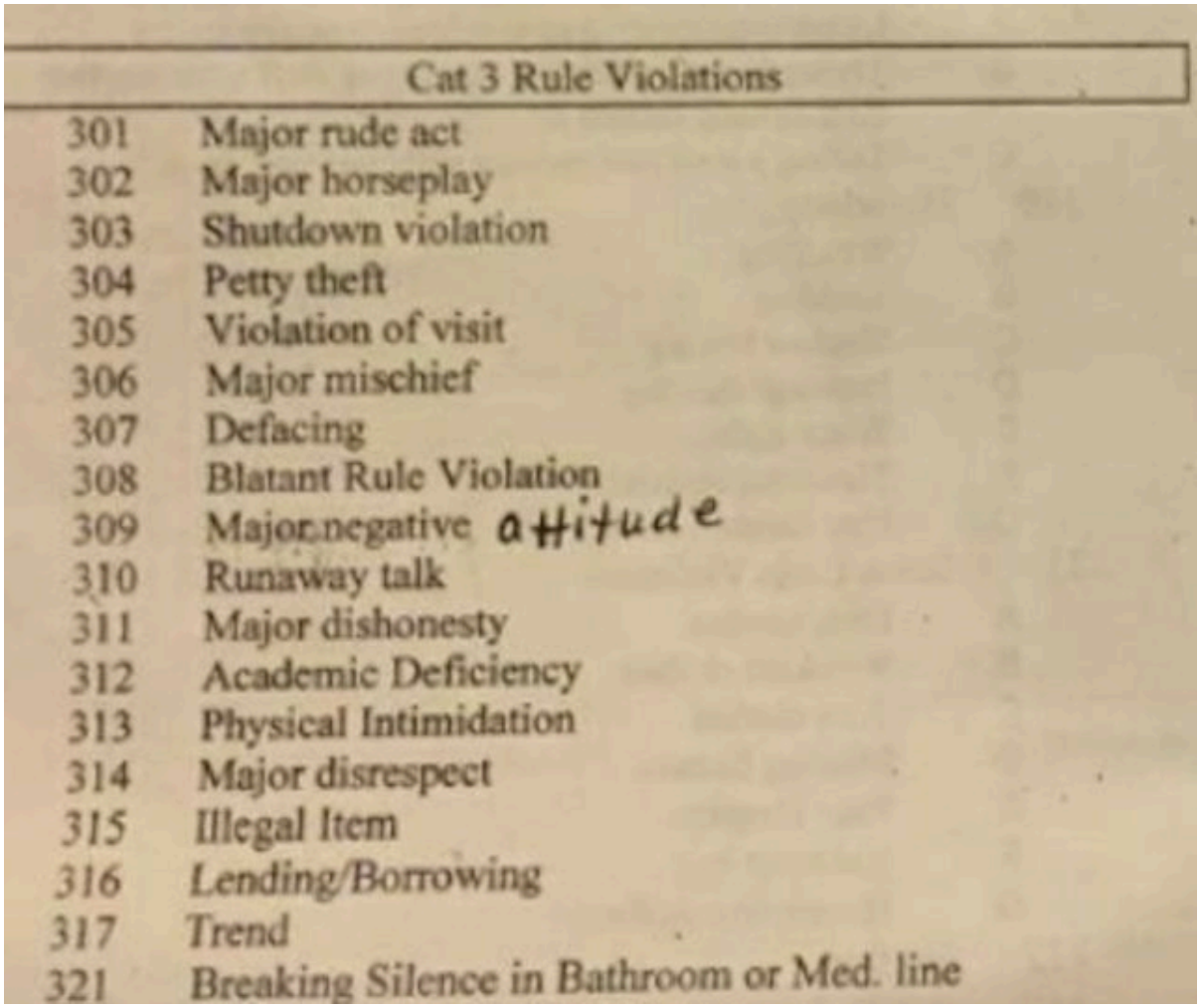
Misery at Carolina Springs



Mattie Smith at Carolina Springs Academy

Mattie Smith, who was forced to attend the school for 18 months in 2004, told *babe* about the decade of therapy she went through after leaving. "The school was a mess," she said. "The whole program was a mess."

From the moment she arrived, Mattie, then just 16 years old, said she was considered a "refuser" — someone who didn't follow the strict rules of the school. She was disciplined for infractions like crossing her ankles, or speaking to another student in the cafeteria.



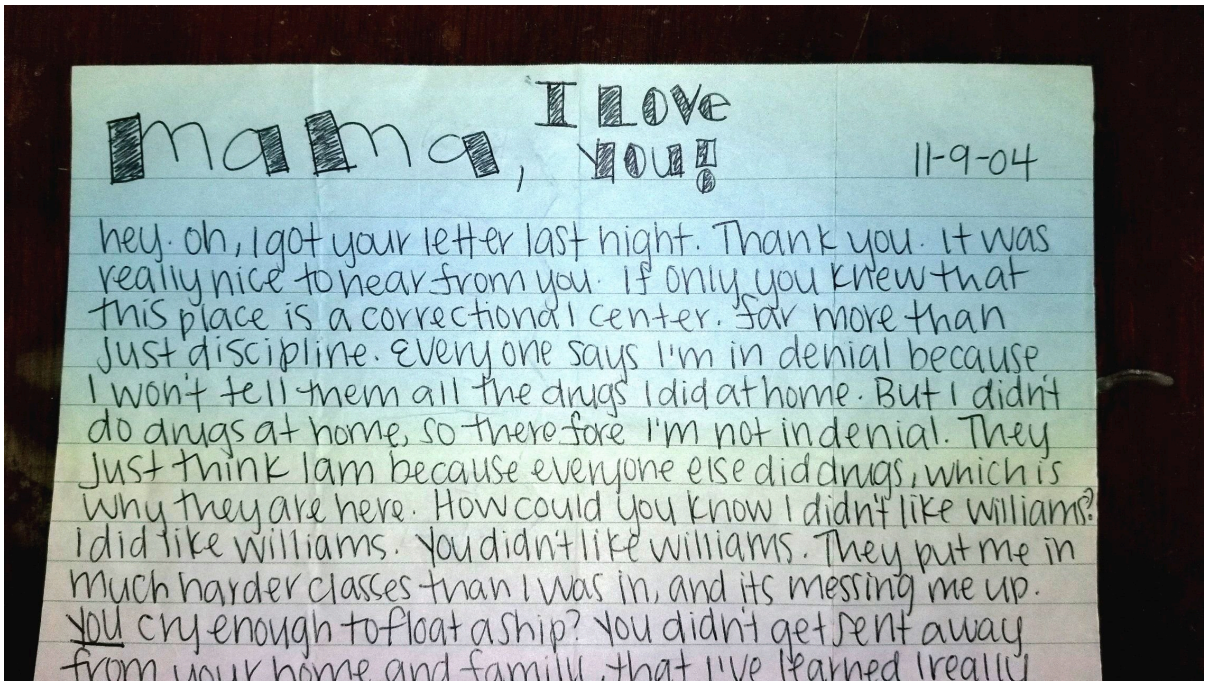
Cat 3 Rule Violations	
301	Major rude act
302	Major horseplay
303	Shutdown violation
304	Petty theft
305	Violation of visit
306	Major mischief
307	Defacing
308	Blatant Rule Violation
309	Major negative attitude
310	Runaway talk
311	Major dishonesty
312	Academic Deficiency
313	Physical Intimidation
314	Major disrespect
315	Illegal Item
316	Lending/Borrowing
317	Trend
321	Breaking Silence in Bathroom or Med. line

An extract of Carolina Springs' rules

Mattie kept a copy of the rules sheet and shared it with us. Behavior violations include "facial expressions", "gossiping", "unauthorized communication with another student", "runaway plans", "self inflicted injury", "lending/borrowing" and "breaking silence in bathroom or medicine line."

Breaking any of the rules, according to Mattie, would land a violator in "OP", an isolated outhouse used as a punishment block. There, Mattie said she was forced through physical punishments including holding her arms above her head for hours on end.

A desperate letter Mattie sent her mom in November 2004 reads: "It was really nice to hear from you. If only you knew that this place is a correctional center. Far more than just discipline."



Mama, I LOVE YOU! 11-9-04

hey. oh, I got your letter last night. Thank you. It was really nice to hear from you. If only you knew that this place is a correctional center. far more than just discipline. every one says I'm in denial because I won't tell them all the drugs I did at home. But I didn't do drugs at home, so therefore I'm not in denial. They just think I am because everyone else did drugs, which is why they are here. How could you know I didn't like Williams? I did like Williams. You didn't like Williams. They put me in much harder classes than I was in, and its messing me up. You cry enough to float a ship? You didn't get sent away from your home and family, that I've learned I really

Mattie's letter to her mom from 2004

She added that teachers refused to believe her when she was sick, forcing her to pass large kidney stones without medical assistance. But one of the most traumatic experiences came when her grandfather died.

"My family rep told me it was my fault I wasn't going home to be with my family, because I was a bad kid, and my grandfather died knowing I was a 'piece of shit.'"

Sam (not his real name) who was sent to Carolina Springs in 2002 at 16, told *babe* he too was often physically abused during his time at the facility. Sam, who spent eight months at the school, remembered he was told by a staff member to lie face-down on the ground in OP. The teacher then dug his knee into Sam's back. "He didn't restrain me," Sam claimed. "He flat-out assaulted me."

Sam compiled memories from Carolina Springs into a short book, which he shared with us. "Not a day goes by that I don't wish that this had never happened," he wrote. "These programs have stolen parts of people's lives that they will never get back, all for the

purpose of making money… I have spent years dealing with what went on during my time in the program."

Carolina Springs operated from 1998 until 2009, when it was shut down for failing to comply with unspecified licensing regulations. After it closed, law enforcement found more than 70 dead animal carcasses on campus.

Who is Narvin Lichfield?



Narvin Lichfield

Lichfield, 57, has been running behavior modification schools for years. He is affiliated with a lucrative business called the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools, or WWASPS, which has run schools accused of physically and emotionally abusing kids.

Robert Lichfield, Narvin's brother, founded the company, which at one point was reportedly netting $90 million in tuition payments. A number of WWASPS facilities have been shut down, accused of inflicting "a life of pain and fear" on children. Just earlier this year, WWASPS school in Iowa was shut down after the director was convicted for sexually abusing the students. He is now serving nine years in prison.

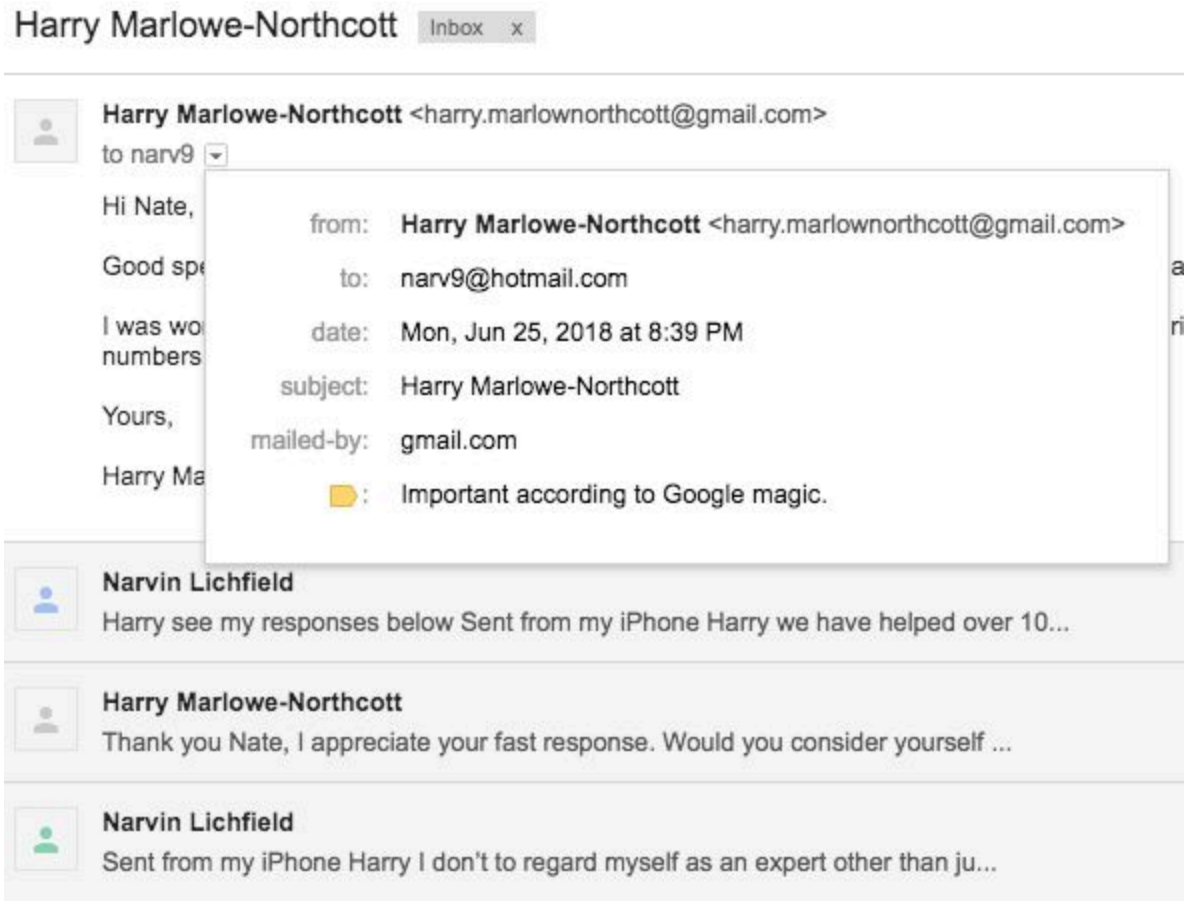
Carolina Springs was a WWASPS facility. Southern Oaks does not mention anything about WWASPS on their site. But Lichfield has reopened his school, and parents continue to send their kids to him in the hope they will return better behaved.

After being tipped off about the school, *babe* found out that Southern Oaks is just the latest incarnation of Carolina Springs – and that Lichfield is still at the helm. Just under a different name.

"We teach all of the students in our reform school how to work hard and get out of entitlement," says the site advertising Southern Oaks. Stock photos of kids learning and graduating from college are splashed over the site, as well as a daily schedule that begins at 5:45 AM and includes "Ethics and Moral Education and Therapy."

Posing as a parent with an unruly child, I contacted Southern Oaks and asked to hear about the school. A man who said his name was "Nate Browning" called me up to discuss the problems I was having with my fictional daughter. But then he emailed me from his "narv9@hotmail.com" address, and his name showed up as "Narvin

Lichfield" in my inbox. Despite this, he continued to sign off as "Nate."



I am Harry Marlowe-Northcott

"We have a very, very conservative background," Lichfield told me on the phone, believing I was a father with a 14-year-old girl. "We're gonna teach her not to lie. We're gonna teach her how to have a reverence for sacred things. When a kid comes into our program, we're gonna work their butts off. If they do something stupid, we give them calisthenics. If she lies to me in any form, we're really gonna nail her."

When asked if his school used any other form of physical punishment, Lichfield said: "We would restrain her – we would take her to the ground with the least force possible."

Troublingly, Lichfield said he would be happy to use conversion therapy on my fictional daughter. After I told him she was gay, he

said he would lay on group therapy, one-on-one sessions with a local psychiatrist, as well as a Mormon-driven "addiction recovery" treatment – to try to change her sexuality.

"We have a society that wants to basically say there is no values, there is no standards and anything's OK," he said. "Quite frankly, that's why we're here. We don't believe that. We believe the worst thing you can do is pass that kind of philosophy off on children. If you want to destroy them, teach them that there is no values."

He later quoted me a price of $3,500 to come and take my daughter from New York to South Carolina, having explained his school costs over $50,000 for accommodation, online school classes and incidentals.

Southern Oaks continues



A photo of students attending Southern Oaks in June 2018

Sue Scheff, who sent her daughter to Carolina Springs, told *babe* she was "completely appalled" by the news that Lichfield continues to operate a school there. Scheff wasn't allowed to speak to her daughter for almost six months, the duration of her stay at Carolina

Springs. After she was pulled out of the school, she was treated by a counselor for depression and nightmares.

"As a parent who had a teen in a Narvin Lichfield run program, it's very disturbing to learn he's opened another teen facility," she said. "We had a horrifying experience — one my daughter, still at 33 years old, will tell you she remembers like it was yesterday."

After asking Lichfield for more information about Southern Oaks, he sent me a link for his program under yet another name. It's called "Wake up Call for Teens Boot Camps/Boarding School."

In between conservative memes about "the real problem isn't police 'brutality'" and the "decline of moral values", Lichfield posts photos of kids posing on campus, looking extremely uncomfortable.

He's still sending emails for me to sign up my non-existent daughter.

If you were a student at Southern Oaks and want to share your story, contact harry@babe.net.

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by Nian Hu

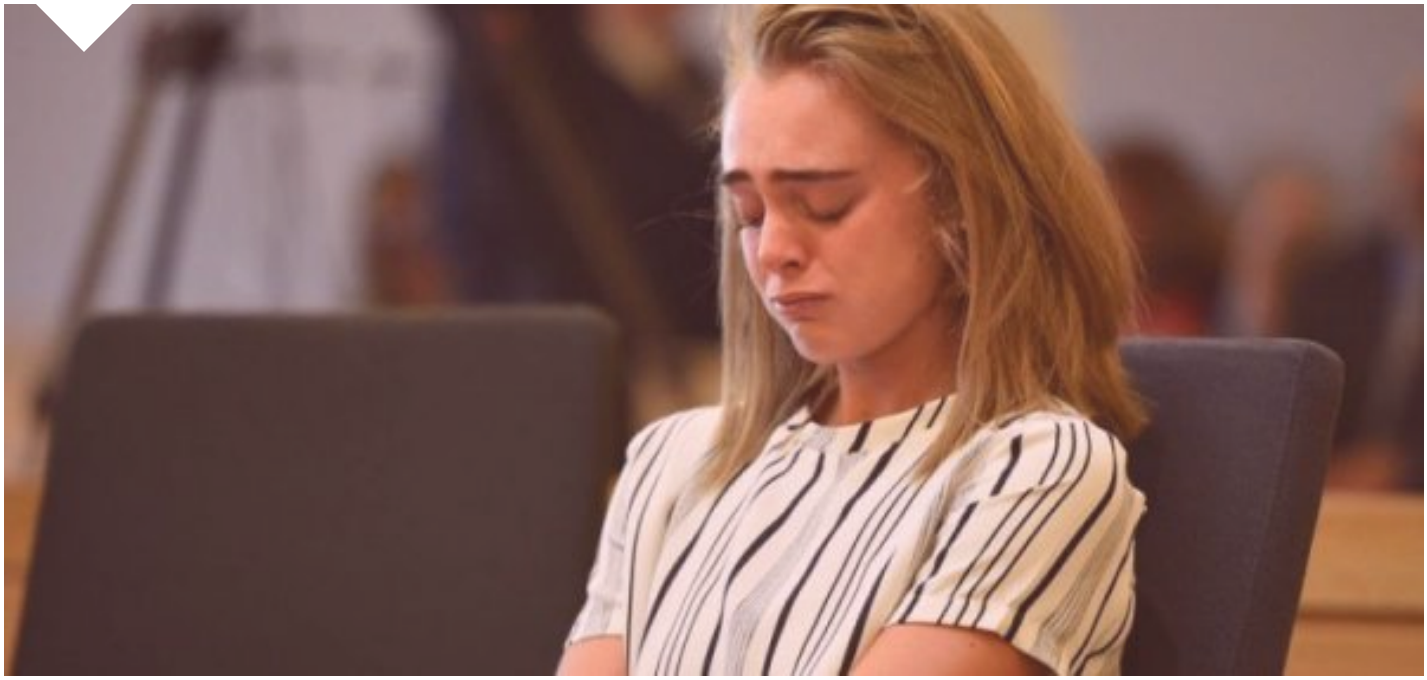
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