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Parents want academy closed - (Gulf Coast Academy)

Friday, November 09 2007 Royce Armstrong
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LUCEDALE - Barbara Ramirez of Chicago wants a Lucedale home for troubled youth shut down because of poor living conditions, student abuse and the inability of the school's officials to prevent students from escaping.

Ramirez said she began the campaign to shut down the Gulf Coast Academy after a recent visit to the school where her daughter, Tianna, 17, is enrolled.

Ramirez attended a seminar at the school but found what she considers intolerable conditions.

"I was appalled," Ramirez said. "The seminar was held in the chapel. I went into the bathroom and it was filthy. Three roaches were crawling up the wall. I almost got sick."

That was just the beginning.

Her daughter told her stories about poor food, abusive discipline, student fights and escapes. While Ramirez could not confirm the stories, she did see broken glass in the school yard and broken windows patched with plastic garbage bags. She also learned that her daughter was not seeing a psychologist each month as promised or having weekly counseling sessions.

"I don't have any idea what the kids were doing for recreation," Ramirez said. "I never saw any of the kids outside and weeds are growing in the swimming pool."

Ramirez also said there was no security and that the staff lied to the parents attending the seminar.

"We found out several of the kids had escaped the week before," said Ramirez. "They told us that only one was still missing. That was not true. Three were missing."

The academy has a checkered past. It dates to 1988 when it was opened as the Bethel Children's Home by the Rev. Herman Fountain. Over the years, the home has been plagued by a series of troubles, including riots, students running away and allegations of child abuse. The home was closed by court order in 1990 and later reopened by Fountain as the Bethel Boy's Academy. More abuse allegations followed with Fountain and others losing a $900,000 child abuse suit in federal court last year.

The home has also been known as the Eagle Point Christian Academy and then as the Pine View Academy with Fountain's son, John, listed as the owner.

The school is affiliated with World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools, which serves as an umbrella organization for several similar schools across the United States and in the Caribbean.

Ramirez enrolled her daughter Tianna in the school for troubled teens in late July. She had not seen the campus but enrolled her daughter there based upon recommendations from counselors at Teen Help LLC, with which the school is affiliated.

From the very beginning, things just did not seem right, Ramirez said. Communication with school staff was poor. She called and left messages but never had her calls returned.

She was also concerned about her daughter's education.

"Tianna was failing her junior year in April," Ramirez said. "Now, after only two months, they are telling me that she has completed both her junior and senior years and has graduated from high school."

Ramirez is one of eight sets of parents who has contacted the Hattiesburg American in recent weeks about problems they have found with the school.

Another was Janine Jannicelli of Raleigh, N.C., who withdrew her 14-year-old son during the Labor Day weekend when she visited the school.

Her concerns had been growing all weekend, but when she saw a much larger boy being dragged by three staff members from one dorm area to her son's dorm, she became alarmed for her son's safety. The older boy had been involved in a fight.

The Jannicellis asked school administrator Harold Dabel if he could guarantee the safety of their son. He told them he could not.

Dabel did not respond to telephone calls or e-mail questions about the parents' concerns.

Safety was just one of Jannicelli's concerns after the visit with her son. Other concerns included the quality of the education he was receiving and his living conditions.

Among other things, Jannicelli said she personally saw roaches inside the dormitories and filth in dorm rooms, showers and the weight room. She said she believes e-mails from her son were edited by the staff, that the quality of the food was not good and students were allowed to get on the Internet to view pornography.

At least one parent, however, did not feel Jannicelli's concerns were justified.

"I don't want to sound like a cheerleader - the school definitely has kinks to work out," said Colleen Edwards of Phoenix. "But I feel strongly that there is no intentional harm or danger happening and that the staff are trying to run a legitimate program that helps kids. It's a very tough population of kids."

Edwards said her son has recently completed the program at Gulf Coast Academy.

Colleen Fleming of Mastic, N.Y., whose son has been at the school for almost three months, complained that she called the school but her calls were not returned. When she was able to talk with her son, she said, the conversations were monitored by the staff. She said his e-mails were edited.

"We did not receive any reports from the school and I do not believe he received the counseling we were paying for," Fleming said.

Tuition for the 12-month program is $32,340, parents say.

In addition to the tuition, parents pay for medical and dental treatments, clothing and uniforms, hair cuts, postage, phone calls, supervision and transportation costs and psychiatric treatment and counseling. The total cost for a year is roughly $50,000, according to Fleming.

The school has experienced a number of problems since Labor Day. A student fight broke out Sept. 8, with eight students arrested and taken to the Forrest County Juvenile Detention Center in Hattiesburg. A series of student escapes also have occurred with four students disappearing for nearly a week. Finally, on Sept. 21, the 33 boys at the co-educational school were transferred to another facility in South Carolina, leaving 13 girls at the school.

Since that time, at least four of the remaining girls have been withdrawn. Four sets of parents are also in the process of initiating a class action suit, Jannicelli said.

"My daughter is out of there and safe," Ramirez said. "I am worried about the other girls who are still there. I want that place closed for good."

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