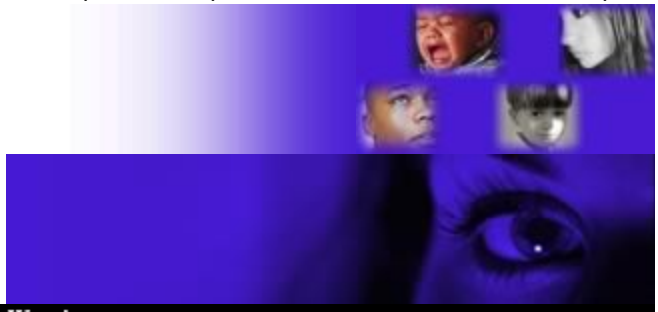


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West Virginia News

Mass. parents sue treatment center where son killed himself

Friday, December 20, 2002

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) - The parents of a 14-year-old Massachusetts boy who killed himself at a wilderness treatment center are suing the center, alleging negligence and fraud.

Ryan Lewis hanged himself from a tree with a tent cord on Feb. 13, 2001, a day after he told instructors that he had been trying to kill himself, according to the lawsuit.

Alldredge Academy, renamed Ayne Institute in August, and the center's two founders, L. Jay Mitchell and Lance Wells, were named in the lawsuit filed Thursday in Kanawha Circuit Court. Lewis' parents, Diana and Paul Lewis of East Longmeadow, Mass., are asking for unspecified punitive damages.

Ryan Lewis was brought by his parents to West Virginia to participate in a three-month program at the Tucker County center, which offered therapy through outdoor activities like hiking and camping.

The lawsuit alleges that a short time into the boy's stay, he showed instructors a slash on his arm where he tried to kill himself. After promising that he would not hurt himself anymore, Ryan Lewis was handed back his program-supplied knife.

The Lewises noted on their application that their son had attempted suicide twice before, according to the lawsuit, which was assigned to Circuit Judge Charles King.

A hearing on the lawsuit has not been set.

Ayne Institute officials and the Lewises were not available for comment Friday.

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The facility entered into a court-approved agreement with the state Department of Health and Human Resources in August to rename itself, evaluate residents within 24 hours of arrival and hire experienced behaviorial health staff.

In June, the center was fined $5,000 after pleading no contest to charges of child neglect resulting in death.

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