

Guest Post: 'Going Undercover as a Reporter'

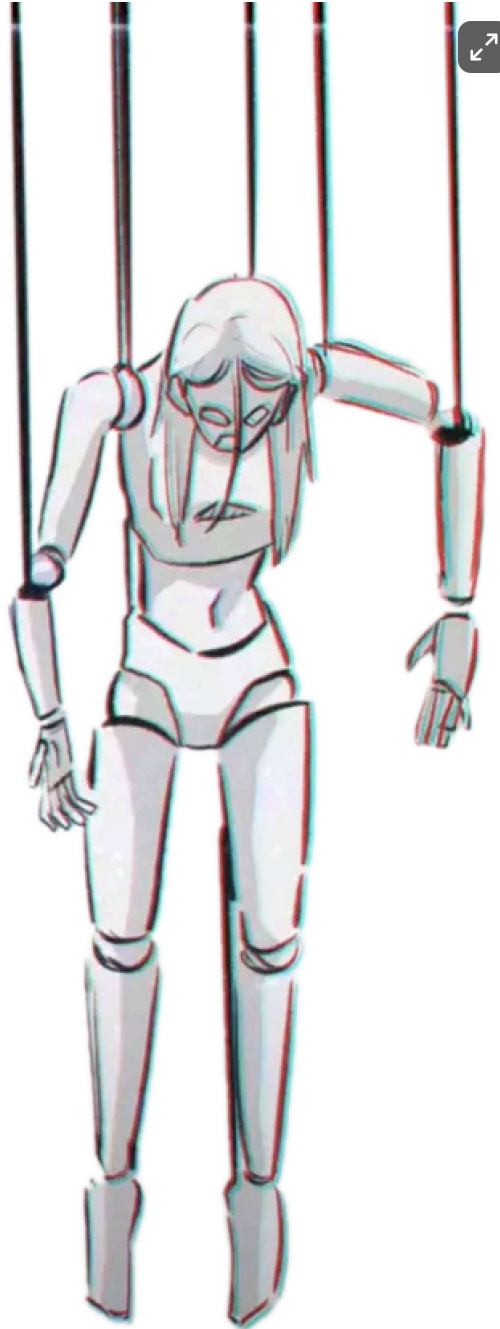
In which former student Emma Lehman discusses the experience of making 'Gooned,' an important new podcast about the troubled teen industry



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When I first got the job teaching I imagined I would have rooms full of students like Emma Lehman. The reality however is a bit different. I treasure every kind of person I have the pleasure of teaching but rarerly do I have individuals as driven, talented, and—well—cool as Emma.

She's simply a star! And as much as I want to gush about her achievements—her new podcast “Gooned,” about the troubled teen industry, was just named by the *Guardian* one its best of the week—I think it's better to let the wunderkind speak for herself.

Give her work [a listen](#)! And let me know what you're up to. (Me? I'm visiting my mom and grading final papers.)

Scared Straight

By Emma Lehman

There I stood, a recording device sewn into my breast pocket and sweat dripping down the backs of my knees, sticking out like a sore thumb.

“Hey, I love your suit,” I heard from behind me.

I wheeled around and scanned the woman's nametag: an admissions director for a wilderness therapy program whose leaked information forms proclaimed to accept “only immature 14 year-olds and relatively mature 10 year-olds” and whose treatment claimed to be effective for children struggling with everything from learning disabilities to “stealing problems” to “obesity.”

“Thanks,” I said, probably too loudly. “I figured I wanted to look sharp.”

“The hair, the whole thing,” she gestured from my gelled mullet down to my loafers. “You look like an undercover reporter!”

“Oh,” I choked out, the knee sweat pooling in the heels of my shoes. Oh God.

She invited me to her table, where directors and administrators of Idaho wilderness therapy programs, therapeutic boarding schools, and residential treatment centers sat chatting about the weather and Boise nightlife. I was the youngest one at the table by several presidential administrations, and the only one without a program name on my badge.

I dutifully repeated my cover story: I'm a PhD student at USC looking to get into the field of youth residential treatment. I'm here for continuing education and to learn about this industry. I know enough, but not too much. My questions are firm, prodding, but never accusatory. We're on the same side.

“What about, though,” cried a man in a toupee so dark and dense it looked like a hat. “What about the transport? You know about that?”

The table fell silent. For the first time since I arrived, I felt a palpable discomfort, a shift in energy as though someone had used a flash camera in the movie *Get Out*.

“No,” I said, recalling an interview with a survivor who told me stories of being beaten, zip-tied, and thrown into a van. Another survivor who told me of being strip searched and led through the airport. Another who saw their parents watching from the hallway. “What’s that?”

Before the latter half of the word “kidnapping” could escape his lips, someone changed the subject.

This was the first and only time over the next two days that the veil was almost lifted, that there was some acknowledgement of something nefarious.

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Now, what is a 23-year-old LA-based journalist doing in Idaho with a recording device in the lining of her only suit jacket? A few months earlier, I constructed my cover story to weasel my way into the National Association of Therapeutic Schools And Program’s 2023 Rocky Mountain Regional Conference, a trade show for higher-ups in the Troubled Teen Industry (TTI).

I began reporting on the TTI when I stumbled upon a clip of the daytime mental health talk show Dr. Phil. I watched as the show lauded programs like Turnabout Ranch, sending many young guests to wilderness therapy programs – often by force, and always sensationally – in an effort to scare them straight. I vaguely remembered when the viral “cash me outside girl,” Danielle Bregoli (now known by her stage name BhadBhabie), had been sent to Turnabout in 2016 at just 13 years old. Five years later, Bregoli came forward to expose the abuse she experienced at the program, directly implicating Phil and calling for more coverage of what she said was a common experience.

Survivors of Turnabout, and hundreds of similar programs, were excited to see a famous face revealing what they had known for a long time. So I googled “Troubled Teen Industry.”

The Troubled Teen Industry is a network of profit-incentivized behavior modification facilities for youth ranging from wilderness programs to therapeutic boarding schools whose predatory tactics capitalize on families in crisis and victimize hundreds of thousands of children and teens every year.

The deeper I dug, the more startled I became: the industry was huge. Multi-billion-dollar huge. Hundreds of thousands of kids a year huge. Paris Hilton, Kat Von D, BhadBhabie, Chet

Hanks, and a handful of other celebrities huge.

Started from a violent religious cult in the 1960s huge.

I found myself frequenting survivor forums and support groups, reading stories of abuse and neglect so severe that they seemed fictitious. Stories from as recently as this year to as far back as the 1970s revealed harrowing experiences that left survivors with trauma they still hadn't shaken decades later.

I learned that some of my own friends had been sent away when we were teenagers, but had been so silenced by shame and stigma that they had never spoken up.

In 2020, Paris Hilton – of TV, handbag, shoe, hotel, perfume, and clothing empire fame – revealed that, beginning at age 16, she had been abused at three behavior modification schools. In her documentary *This Is Paris*, her memoir *Paris*, and a podcast called *Trapped in Treatment*, Hilton revealed a side of her life that stunned the public. Readers, listeners, and viewers were shocked to learn that not only had Hilton experienced physical abuse, food deprivation, and years-long isolation from the outside world, but that the “schools” where she had been abused were part of a multi-billion-dollar industry that is still thriving.

After Paris' story made headlines, thousands of survivors came out of the woodwork, revealing the dark truth behind a well-kept façade reaching into the public school, family court, and juvenile justice systems. Survivor-led organizations like *Unsilenced* publicized survivor testimony and internal documents from TTI programs across the country. Survivors of all ages and walks of life worked to pass new legislation, speak on Capitol Hill, stage rallies, and spread the word.

Yet still, the TTI seemed unshakeable. Just as they had for decades, programs dodged accountability and oversight, and organizations like *NATSAP* worked overtime to legitimize the industry in the eyes of parents, justice professionals, and the public.

On my lunch breaks and my days off from stocking shelves at *Trader Joe's*, I researched. I messaged survivors who shared their stories online, some of whom loudly named and shamed the programs they had been sent to and some of whom remained conspicuously anonymous, still afraid of the power these programs held. I learned about “gooning,” a term used by survivors to describe the common practice of kidnapping children from their beds and transporting them to TTI programs against their will. I learned that it wasn't just individual parents, but the courts and foster care systems that funneled kids into TTI programs.

I mentioned the TTI in passing to my aunt. Hey, a friend of mine worked at one of those.

To my boyfriend. Wait, my friend just disappeared one night in high school, they said he went to military school. Was this it?

At a bar. My son-in-law is still traumatized.

At a house party. Me too. Nobody believes me.

To one of my closest friends. Yeah, remember when my sister just kind of disappeared?

The more reports I read of teens' deaths by suicide or alleged neglect, the harder it became to wrap my head around the perspective of anybody in favor of the Troubled Teen Industry.

I learned that some of my own friends had been sent away when we were teenagers, but had been so silenced by shame and stigma that they had never spoken up. After all, who would believe that not only were you kidnapped and sent hundreds to thousands of miles away from home at your own parents' request?

One morning, suited up for an afternoon shift, I hopped on the phone with a survivor whose testimony I had found online. After escaping a TTI program in the early 1990s, he had tried to bury the trauma, but when Paris Hilton's story exploded in the news, he found that more and more people were receptive to his testimony. "Vaughn," now in his forties with a military career behind him, called me from a burner phone and used a pseudonym, still afraid of what might happen to him or to his family if he spoke out. Towards the end of our call, I asked,

"You mentioned you're married – how long into the relationship did you bring this up with your wife? How do you talk to your kids about it?"

"I lie," He said plainly. "I haven't told her. You're really the first person I've talked to about this since it happened."

I, a random stranger from the internet, was the first person with whom this grown man had felt comfortable enough to share his story. A few hours later, he messaged me:

"Seems like I rambled quite a bit. I got retrospective about it. It feels good to finally say something. Thanks. It meant a lot."

That night, I wrote my two weeks notice, leaving Trader Joe's behind me to dive headfirst into Gooned, a podcast about the Troubled Teen Industry.

With a production budget of "a year and a half of \$17 an hour," I set out to create a series that would expose the truth behind the TTI's public façade. I interviewed dozens of survivors, former staff members, and parents, including my own friends. Their stories were

heartbreaking, their trust in me humbling. Survivors sent me internal documents, handbooks, report cards, photos, admissions forms, and waivers their parents had signed, the content of which made my hair stand on end.

Posing as a 57-year-old Idahoan mother named Nancy, I dove into the process of enrolling my fictional daughter Ella in a wilderness therapy program, and saw firsthand how the deceptive marketing of TTI programs preys on desperate parents. Nancy even hired “goons” to take Ella from her bed in the small hours of the morning and transport her 500 miles away to a Utah wilderness therapy program, a process I discovered took only 48 hours from start to finish and cost about \$6,500, a death waiver, and a custody sign-off.

The more survivor stories I heard, the more pages I read of a contract that would transfer temporary custody of my fictional daughter to two transporters who would pluck her from her bed at 4 AM “with the amount of force necessary to restrain,” the more reports I read of teens’ deaths by suicide or alleged neglect, the harder it became to wrap my head around the perspective of anybody in favor of the Troubled Teen Industry. Especially anybody belonging to NATSAP, the preeminent organization responsible for advertising, lobbying for, and legitimizing it.

But I had not accrued this many frequent flier miles not to try.

The very first evening at that conference, I found myself surrounded by familiar faces – faces I had seen attached to survivor testimony of mistreatment and abuse. Nametags announced people I recognized from harrowing allegations of conversion therapy, attack therapy, scream circles, and verbal harassment. Employees from companies supposedly unable to afford updating dangerous conditions at their facilities were putting margarita after margarita on the company tab, gleefully gobbling finger sandwiches and bacon-themed hors d'oeuvres.

It felt like I had been transported into a world with the same facts attached to a different reality. Echoing in my head as I made lighthearted conversation with those at the helm of the TTI were hours and hours of tape recounting traumatic stories of abuse, neglect, and deception.

I knew that, in the three years since Paris Hilton had revealed her experiences in the TTI, there had been more legislation passed to regulate the industry than in the previous 50 years combined. I knew about the death just months before of 17-year-old Taylor Goodridge – whose complaints of severe stomach pain went ignored and mocked until it was too late – at a NATSAP member program. I knew that the survivor community on social media was growing, that the public was becoming more and more aware of what lay behind the façade of the troubled teen industry.

Or, at least, I thought I did. The longer I spent in the conference space, the more I began to question it all. How, given all of this, were these people milling around blithely, making no mention of any of it? How could they be swapping patient stories and referring to practices

like solitary confinement, legal abduction, and emotional abuse with such glib? How could the stories I had been hearing for months – from 40 year old strangers to my own childhood friends – not give the perpetrators pause?

After nearly a year of reporting, Gooned released on December 6th with the first two episodes. The NATSAP organization, and my experience at their industry conference, is covered in Episode 7. Episode 2 follows the process of becoming “Nancy,” the fictional mother of a struggling teen, and hiring “goons” to transport my daughter to Utah.

Throughout the series, survivors will talk about conversion therapy, medical abuse, food and water deprivation, and other abuses they suffered in the name of behavior modification, and parents will talk about how they were led to believe the TTI was the answer for their struggling children. Activists and researchers will discuss the future of the industry and what can be done to regulate and even abolish it; the inner workings of the TTI’s finances and maintenance of its public face will be unearthed.

Through making Gooned, I had the honor of interviewing and meeting some of the strongest, bravest, most welcoming people I have ever spoken to. My hope is that in these twelve episodes, I can do justice to the experiences of these survivors, families, and former staff members, and reveal the truth behind this multi-billion dollar industry, the lasting trauma it has wrought on hundreds of thousands of people, and what lies on its horizons.

Gooned is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts. Find more information on our website, and see sneak peeks and promotional videos on our TikTok. You can support the show, get early access to episodes, and access exclusive bonus and behind the scenes content on Patreon.

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