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Secrets in the Schoolhouse

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(Secrets in the Schoolhouse)

by Duwayne Escobedo

JAY—It took 12 years for Rebecca Ramirez to come back to Victory Christian Academy.

But this is no happy school reunion for the 28-year-old.

Ramirez waves a sign that claims Michael Palmer, the founder of the all-girls boarding school, raped her when she was a 16-year-old student in 1992.

She stands in a cotton field across from the immaculate, 10-acre campus on State Highway 89 on the outskirts of Jay, a rural northern Santa Rosa County town.

Ramirez wanted to forget Palmer and this place. She couldn't.

Ramirez wanted to cancel her return trip here over the Thanksgiving Day weekend when fear and a sick feeling seized the pit of her stomach. She showed up anyway with her mom, Bonnie, and another former student, Jennifer Connolly.

The three women stand together for two days holding up their signs, one that reads, "Mike Palmer Rapist Lives At School."

Ramirez politely apologizes for the explicit protest signs but says it's time people hear her story. She tells it to several Jay residents who pull their cars over during the two-day protest, including one woman who leaves in tears and promises to tell everyone she knows about it.

"It took two years to tell my parents I was raped," Ramirez says on a recent Sunday afternoon. "I had to admit it to myself first. It's still very hard. But I had to come back, because I want to get this place closed down. I want the 80 girls here now taken out of danger."

Palmer says he did not rape the teenage Ramirez. The Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office took statements from him and Ramirez in 1994 when she first came forward but no charges were filed.

The married man, who was 53 then, does not deny sending Ramirez notes confessing his love for her. He doesn't recall sending her a matching ring and necklace set with Ramirez's birthstone.

"The girls are liars," Palmer says emphatically. He's not surprised at the complaints, explaining that a man who runs an all-girls school is an easy target for troubled young women.

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Ramirez's parents kept the notes and jewelry sent by Palmer because they felt it backed up their daughter's charges that Palmer raped her once in his darkened office and a second time in a trailer on school property.

Bonnie, Ramirez's mother, recalls Palmer driving out to their home near San Diego, after her daughter left the school. He told the Ramirezes he wanted to marry their 17-year-old and even offered them $25,000, she says. Palmer denies the claim.

"He asked my husband if he could marry Rebecca and we were really worried because we found out he had guns with him, and we were afraid he was going to kidnap her and take her away," Bonnie Ramirez says.

STARTING VICTORY

Palmer opened Victory Christian Academy in 1990. For $1,200 a month, the school offers parents a "faith-based" program that promises to help their rebellious and troubled daughters. Girls attending the school are sent by their parents for everything ranging from behavioral problems, drug abuse and depression.

He opened the Jay academy around the time California courts forced him to shutdown a similar lockdown facility in Ramona, Calif., near San Diego because he refused to be licensed by the state. California authorities investigated a variety of complaints, including allegations of abuse. State authorities looked into the 1988 death of a 15-year-old girl, while she helped build a new part of the school. Her death was ruled an accident.

And in September, Mexican authorities closed Genesis-by-the-Sea, a similar school Palmer owns near Rosarito Beach, Mexico, after immigration and child abuse complaints.

Some former students and parents say neglect and abuse happen, not only at Palmer's Victory Christian Academy, but other schools in Santa Rosa County and across the state that all belong to the same organization—Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies.

FACCCA is a volunteer, non-profit group established by Florida law in 1984 that allows the private, faith-based schools to operate with little state oversight. Instead, they're monitored by FACCCA.

FACCCA oversees about 31 schools, including New Beginnings Rebekah Academy in Pace, run by Pastor Wiley Cameron and his wife, Faye. For years, the Camerons ran the Roloff Group homes in Corpus Christi, Texas. The homes provided strict, Bible-based education and training for troubled girls and boys, as well as some adults.

Texas authorities investigated the homes in 2000, after allegations of torture and abuse. Faye Cameron was removed by state officials for abuse and neglect and they banned her from ever working with children in Texas again.

At that time, Texas law allowed private, faith-based schools to operate without a state license. Instead, they could choose to be monitored by the Texas Organization of Christian Child Caring Agencies. Wiley Cameron was a board

member of the Texas agency and critics said it was a conflict of interest for program administrators to oversee themselves.

FIGHT FOR OVERSIGHT

So in 2001, Texas changed the law so the private schools must have state supervision to operate.

Citing infringement of religious liberty, the Camerons closed the doors on the Texas homes and moved to Pace where they signed on with FACCCA and opened New Beginnings Rebekah Academy.

FACCCA also used to include Our Father's House, a home for at-risk, teenage girls run by anti-abortionist extremist John Burt. Burt's wife even served as a FACCCA board member before a Pensacola jury found her husband, John, guilty in May of molesting a 15-year-old.

FACCCA members are made up of the same people who run the schools. In other words, the schools are essentially allowed to oversee themselves. Palmer serves as vice president of the group.

Florida children advocates are calling for the Florida Legislature to follow Texas's lead by creating state supervision over the schools' operations.

Members of the International Survivors Action Committee, a non-profit, child advocacy group based in Bealeton, Va., have monitored these so-called behavior modification facilities for years.

ISAC Research Director Karen Grant isn't surprised at Ramirez's accusations.

"Anything could happen and the kid has no voice," she says. "There are no safety measures here because there is no oversight."

Teresa Calalay led a charge to change the Texas law, after dropping off her son, Justin Simons, in 2000 at the Roloff Group Home in Corpus Christi run by the Camerons. Three weeks later, she picked him up in a wheelchair after he had been beaten, forced to run barefoot through the woods and urinated on by school workers.

"The scales came off my eyes and I understand now that just because you use the word Christian, doesn't mean you're full of love and kindness," she says.

Ed MacClellan, FACCCA executive director, says the organization does investigate its schools, pointing out New Beginnings has been investigated twice and insisting that Faye Cameron quit the boarding school for troubled girls after being questioned for hitting a girl with a curtain rod. He argues it helps to have the same people who run the schools oversee them, because they have a "stake" in making sure the process works. The organization is needed to also protect "religious liberty," he asserts.

MacClellan, who would only answer questions through e-mail, says WEAR's three-day series and this story are motivated by media bias against anything Christian.

"Your goal appears to be to destroy people who have given a lifetime of service to children for little to no pay and who usually invest their own money to help kids."

he says.

'NO LOVE'

But former students of Victory Christian Academy and other similar schools argue that there's nothing Christian about some FACCCA schools.

Kara Botos, 17, spent most of 2003 at Palmer's facility after her father sent her there. She says he didn't approve of her boyfriend at the time and caught her skipping school.

"I had been a Christian beforehand," says Botos, who now lives in Jacksonville. "But this made me question my beliefs. They didn't preach God's love there. They preached God's wrath."

Melanie Silveria attended Palmer's Genesis-by-the-Sea in Mexico before it closed. The 17-year-old, who lives in San Diego, was beaten, sat on by five other girls who were ordered to do so, strapped to her bed at night and dragged around once by a school worker by her long, straight, black hair.

"There's no love. There's no compassion," she says. "It's not a good environment for people who are already emotionally damaged."

Calalay agrees. She believes many of the academies are only in it for the money. She confronted Wiley Cameron at his office in Corpus Christi.

"I said: 'You know, I trusted you with my son (Justin). I needed something and I knew that because of you representing a Baptist church, I trusted you and you have harmed him. You've had no love for my son here. You've done nothing but harm,'" she recalls.

Calalay continues the story passionately, her voice rising: "Pastor Cameron steps to the table and he slams his hands down. He says, 'Dear Lord God,' and he starts praying for me....and then I hit the table and said: 'Don't you pray for me because your God's inferior to mine. I don't know who you're praying for, but I don't want your God doing anything for me.' And he shut up."

GET RIGHT ROOM

Former students say Victory Christian Academy is about strict control. Among other things, the girls cannot talk unless given permission; they cannot talk to other girls about personal things; they are assigned a "buddy" who follows them everywhere they go and reports them for breaking rules; they are not allowed visits by their parents for the first three months; they are given one 30-minute phone call home a month; and all phone calls and letters are monitored.

Tales of abuse by girls who attended Palmer's facilities in Jay, Mexico and California who came forward for this story are remarkably consistent. Descriptions of abuse match ones found on Internet forums and in public records obtained from California and Santa Rosa County.

One California social worker investigating an abuse claim by a Palmer student describes duct tape put over her mouth; her mouth washed out with soap until it bled; students given animals to raise which the preacher shot; handcuffing; girls

forced to eat their own vomit; and spending hours writing thousands of lines for minor infractions, such as "I will remember to shut off the light."

Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office reports show more than a dozen girls have tried to run away from the isolated Victory Christian Academy since it opened in Jay 14 years ago.

In 1997, one student reported that Palmer choked her, sat on her and pulled her hair.

Palmer denied the allegations but told officers he did have to restrain the girl.

Several former students and authorities also describe a "Get Right Room," to discipline the girls for infractions as little as forgetting to say "Yes, ma'am" or "Yes, sir" when addressing staff. Girls can be there for a few hours or up to a week for breaking the rules.

Girls who attended Palmer's school in California said the Get Right Room there had a concrete floor. There was a peephole looking into it and the door was bolted from the outside. Lighting was controlled from a switch outside the door. While in the tight space, tapes of fire-and-brimstone sermons were piped in.

Ramirez also recalls the room. She spent time at both of Palmer's schools in California and Jay.

"It was emotional and mental breakdown for sure," she says. "They made you feel horrible about yourself to the point where you felt worthless. Then that was where they could make you do anything they wanted to do and just make you believe that you can't live without this school."

At the Jay compound, students say the Get Right Room is a tamer version of the one in California. Botos describes it as a small, pantry like space without locks, but says girls are still forced to stay inside while "preaching tapes" are played.

Palmer renamed the space the "Time Out Room." Many students still refer it to as the Get Right Room. Botos says she got sent to the room four times in her 10 months at the Jay facility, including once for crying. She spent four hours in there that time.

'FOOD GAMES'

Other complaints include bad food or being forced to eat too much. In fact, several former students say if you don't eat everything on your plate, staff will force you to eat it, even if the girl throws it up.

Palmer says the accusations are more lies. He says the girls receive nutritious meals, but they often play "food games," and they have to be monitored for eating too much or too little.

Botos and Ramirez say students are also encouraged to keep other girls "in line," if they act out.

A Santa Rosa County Sheriff's deputy was called to the school in September 2003 when a 16-year-old girl fought attempts to force her into the Get Right Room. The deputy reported 14 students and a 27-year-old male staff member

wrestled the girl to the ground and held her there for 40 minutes under the orders of another staff member.

Palmer prides himself on the fact his staff does not use corporal punishment. He says "no one touches a girl" until she initiates aggressive behavior.

In fact, while making his point to WEAR news reporter Mollye Barrows during an interview outside the Jay academy, Palmer suddenly takes a step toward her and pushes both of his hands hard and fast past her ears in an attempt to imitate what it was like to be shoved by a student.

The aggressive demonstration surprises Barrows but Palmer points out that's what it was like to deal with some of these problem girls.

GETTING AN EDUCATION

Former students also call the education laughable. The girls say Accelerated Christian Education's lesson workbooks called PACEs are used. The education is essentially self-study because former students report Victory Christian Academy staff weren't teachers and often couldn't explain how to do the lessons.

"When it came to academics (Palmer) said, 'You can get it when you get out. It's not important,'" Ramirez recalls.

Connolly, who attended Palmer's Jay boarding school with Ramirez, says Bible verses and how to be an obedient, compliant wife was what was taught.

"I took a placement test after I left and I failed so miserably," says Connolly, now 27, who's working for a business degree at Fresno (Calif.) City College. "The staff was supposed to help you but they didn't know a whole lot either."

Botos says the day started at 6 a.m. with an hour of Bible reading and the day included chapel three times a day, six days a week where students listened to Palmer rant and rave during his sermons.

"It was all about how we're going to hell," she says. "They stuffed scripture down our throats. Stuffed it. Stuffed it. Stuffed it."

For this education and "behavior modification" parents pay Palmer $1,200 a month. The school typically has about 80 girls, which translates into $96,000 a month or $1,152,000 a year.

The campus on Highway 89 just south of the Jay town limits is a $1.2 million campus, according to the Santa Rosa County Property Appraiser's assessment. Its tan brick buildings sit on serene-looking grounds with neatly trimmed grass and shade trees. A chain link fence surrounds the front of the campus, which has a half-circle driveway that enters and exits the two-lane highway at the front corners of the property.

Palmer owns red Harley-Davidson and Honda motorcycles, according to public records. He also owns a Thunder Bird that he paid $8,000 for repairs on, a local mechanic says. Students report him making recent trips to France and Mexico.

"I just thought of him as some rich, rude dude," Botos says.

'WONDERFUL SCHOOL'

Bonnie Ramirez says she feels anger and remorse today for sending, Rebecca, her only daughter, to Victory Christian Academy in 1992 because she and her husband didn't like the boy she was dating.

"I felt like it was a safe place because I had talked to the owners of the school ahead of time and they just seemed like really nice people," the mother says.

There are those girls who say Victory Christian Academy and similar homes, such as the Roloff homes shutdown in Texas, did offer them hope, guidance and nurturing when no one else did. They claim the schools helped them turn away from drugs, alcohol and suicide.

Kerry Logsdon, a former student at Roloff, says: "My mom didn't want me. I came here and they teach me and this place has done nothing but help me."

Palmer insists his academy is a success and parents across the country want to send their daughters to his Jay boarding school.

Joanna Rosado spent two years at Victory Christian Academy and recently left. She angrily defends the program.

"It's a wonderful school," Rosado says. "It did a lot for me. The only reason Victory doesn't help a girl is because the girl doesn't want to be helped."

Rosado admits the school is strict but says the focus is self-improvement. She says the Get Right Room is for girls who are a danger to themselves or others and the fiery preaching is aimed at bringing the girls faith and salvation.

"Sometimes I felt they were against me, but in my heart I knew I was doing something wrong," Rosado says.

MOVING FORWARD

For Ramirez, though, Victory Christian Academy is a nightmare, even 12 years later.

She's telling her story now she says because it took her this long to go through therapy and get her life back together. She's now happily married and a pre-med student. She smiles, laughs and feels confident about herself and her future.

Ramirez began planning the protest of Palmer's Victory Christian Academy a few months ago. She also met with Santa Rosa County Sheriff's investigators while visiting, speaking to them for about seven hours. They're looking into reopening the case involving her rape charges.

Investigators questioned both Ramirez and Palmer in 1994—two years after the alleged rape—and took their statements. However, the investigation went no further. No charges were filed against Palmer.

The Ramirezes filed suit against Palmer in 1994 but it was eventually dropped because the family says the suit was too difficult to pursue from across the country.

Ramirez says she'll be OK, even if her criminal case never goes to court. She says she simply wants authorities to have her allegations on the record.

Ray Sansom, a Florida House representative and member of the Education Appropriations Committee, says he plans to ask the state Legislature to investigate Victory Christian Academy and FACCCA.

"Regardless of whether they're faith-based education programs, the Legislature has a responsibility to look into the matter," says Sansom, after hearing Ramirez's accusations. "I certainly anticipate our committee would review allegations like that. We have a responsibility to make sure things like these girls describe do not continue. We will ensure the programs are running the way they should and people are safe."

Ramirez says she hopes community leaders and residents do scrutinize the Jay academy and that her public protest helps prevent any more girls from going through what she claims she did.

"He would tell me how much he loved me and that we had a future together," Ramirez says. "He called his wife, Patty Palmer, a witch. He used Bible verses about love and twisted them. He said if I did not love him back, I would be sinning and going against what God had planned for me."

Ramirez recalls feeling helpless as a teenage girl to fight back. She says Palmer forced her to wear a promise ring he gave her.

"I didn't want to hear what he said about that but I was afraid of getting into trouble," she says. "I was completely helpless. I had no voice. The staff was threatened by him and they would not listen to me. He showed me he had guns. In a roundabout way, he threatened me. He knew I felt bad about myself anyway."

NO MORE FEAR

Connolly, who spent nearly three years at Victory Christian Academy, says Palmer used her to pass notes to Ramirez. Connolly, who also claims she was molested by a staff member, says she had no clue about the alleged affair.

"I was naïve at that time," she recalls. "I wasn't that bright. I'd go and deliver the notes to her. The look on her face showed terror. But I couldn't do anything. Nobody listens. You have no voice. No recourse. You are a nobody. No agencies check on these children. They have such control over every little thing that goes on here. I tried to forget it for a long time. I don't care if anyone believes us anymore. I've been quiet for too long."

During their two-day protest, Rebecca and Bonnie Ramirez and Connolly had several Jay residents stop their cars on the narrow shoulder and talk to them.

Gary Spivey, of Jay, says he saw the shocking protest signs and had to stop because he has 20-year-old and 15-year-old daughters.

"This needs to be investigated," he tells reporters. "I don't have any reason not to believe them. It hits home having girls about their age. I'm glad they're out here letting people know what's going on. You don't expect this in your community."

During the protest, the former students say Palmer drove out to the perimeter of the property in a golf cart and acted like he didn't know them. They say they tried to ignore him but he remained there asking them their names and questions for about 20 minutes.

As he drove off in his golf cart, Connolly says she heard him saying, "You are still cowards."

Ramirez says she's a coward no longer. She finally was able to confront the man she used to fear.

"I got to see him face to face as an adult," she says. "Before I came here, I was scared. This has helped me get past that fear and put an end to that little bit of control he still had over my dreams and my life."

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IT'S THE LAW

The Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies Inc. is a voluntary peer accrediting association created in 1982 as a non-profit organization whose purpose is to oversee provisions of Florida Statute 409.176.

This 1982 law provides for the registration of all residential child caring agencies who operate on a religious basis and choose not to receive state or federal money. Section 409.176 requires child caring agencies supply certain information on the children, agency personnel, and proof of compliance with minimum standards, as part of an annual application for registration. Instead of state oversight, the programs are monitored by FACCCA.

The intent of FACCCA is ensure the physical and spiritual health, safety, and well-being of children placed in residential care in member agency programs. FACCCA provides continuing education and training for Child Care Administrators and staff. It also provides technical assistance for new homes being developed in the state.

FACCCA currently oversees about 30 faith-based schools across Florida. Members of the schools serve on the board, which FACCCA officials say helps because they have a "stake" in making sure the process works. The organization is also needed to protect "religious liberty," FACCCA officials say.

FOR MORE INFO:

Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a voluntary peer accrediting association that oversees faith-based programs in Florida: www.faccca.com/index.html

International Survivors Action Committee, a non-profit children's advocacy group that monitors private schools: www.isaccorp.org

An Internet chat group open to former students of Genesis Ministries, including Victory Christian Academy students in Jay and Genesis By The Sea students in Rosarita Beach, Mexico: www.groups.yahoo.com/group/victorychrisitanacademy

Web site by Alexia Parks, who wrote "An American Gulag" about schools for troubled teens: www.teenliberty.org

LOCAL FACCCA SCHOOLS

GENESIS MINISTRIES/VICTORY

CHRISTIAN ACADEMY

Enrolls: Girls 11- to 18-years-old
Executive Director: Mike Palmer
Location: 13050 Highway 89 Jay, Fla. 32565
Phone: (850) 675-4097 Fax: (850) 675-0419
E-mail: mp65@pcola.gulf.net

NEW BEGINNINGS GIRLS ACADEMY

Enrolls: Girls 12- to 17-years-old
Executive Director: Bill J. McNamara
Location: 3111 Zepp Lane Pace, Fla. 32571
Phone: (850) 994-5457 Fax: (850) 994-4460
E-mail: iiv9t418@hotmail.com

FAMILY LIFE CENTER

Enrolls: Maternity
Executive Director: Jan Zin (Pat Young, Administrator)
Address: P.O. Box 250 Fort Walton Beach, Fla. 32549
Phone: (850) 243-5800 Fax (850) 864-5233
E-mail: flcjanz@hotmail.com

Source: Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies Inc., Palatka, Fla.

This investigative report is a collaboration between WEAR and the Independent News. WEAR news reporter Mollye Barrows and photojournalist Jennifer Merritt completed a three-day series, "Secrets in the Schoolhouse," that ran Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday on WEAR. Barrows and Independent News Editor Duwayne Escobedo co-wrote the "Secrets in the Schoolhouse," cover story.

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