

The Shadow Penal System for Struggling Kids

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Rachel Aviv

October 9, 2021

In the spring of her freshman year of high school, in 2011, Emma Burris was woken at three in the morning. Someone had turned on the lights in her room. She was facing the wall and saw a man's shadow. She reached for her cell phone, which she kept under her pillow at night, but it wasn't there. The man, Shane Thompson, who is six and a half feet tall, wore a shirt with "Juvenile Transport Agent" printed on the back. He and a colleague instructed Emma to put on her clothes and follow them to their car. "She was very verbal, resisting," Thompson told me. Her parents, who had adopted her when she was seven, stood by the doorway, watching silently.

Thompson drove Emma away from her house, in Royal Palm Beach, Florida, and merged onto the highway. Emma, who was fifteen, tried to remember every exit sign she passed, so that she could find her way home, but she was crying too hard to remember the names. In his notes, Thompson wrote, "Emma voiced that she was confused as to why her mom was sending her away." She was on the track, volleyball, and soccer teams, and she didn't want to miss any games.

Part Scottish and part Puerto Rican, Emma was slight, with long, wavy blond hair. Her parents, whose lives revolved around their church, admonished her for being aggressive toward them and for expressing her sexuality too freely. She watched lesbian pornography and had lost her virginity to an older boy. She often read romance novels late at night, when she was supposed to be asleep. To avoid attracting her parents' attention, she used the light from the street to work on a novel that told a story similar to her own life: a young girl spends her early years in foster care, where she is abused, until a Christian family saves her. To keep the ending upbeat, she found herself straying from the facts of her life. Emma worried that her parents, who had three biological children, considered her a burden. "There was always a sense of exile," Emma said. Her mother sometimes told her, "If I have to love you from a distance, I will."

After a three-hour drive, Thompson pulled up to a ranch house in Lakeland, a small city in central Florida. About thirty yards behind the house was a much larger one, with white shutters and a brick fence. Emma was escorted inside the second house and told to strip naked and bend over while she coughed, to prove she wasn't hiding any drugs. She was informed that this would be her new school. It was called Teen Challenge, and she would remain there for at least fifteen months. She was taken to her bedroom, which she would share with four other girls. She noticed a streak of mascara on her pillow, which she took as a sign that the previous occupant had been crying. The room had no doors, and floodlights in the hallways remained on all night. If anyone opened a window, alarms sounded.

Teen Challenge, a network of nonprofits that has received tens of millions of dollars in state and federal grants, has more than a thousand centers in the United States and abroad. George W. Bush has praised it as “one of the really successful programs in America.” The organization, which is affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God church, is made up of centers for adolescents and adults seeking to overcome “life-controlling issues,” such as drug use, depression, or sexual promiscuity. Many people are sent there by courts, as an alternative to juvenile detention or jail.

The school followed a Bible-based curriculum emphasizing character development, and a counsellor gave Emma a thick handbook. Touching was forbidden, she learned. For her first six weeks, she would be a Little Sister. She had to stay six feet away from people, including staff. She was not allowed to speak, except to her two Big Sisters—students who had been in the program for at least six months—and she could not enter a room unless her Big Sisters accompanied her. At church, she had to sit between them. The school was all girls, and contact with boys was prohibited. If she saw a boy at church, she had to look away. At one Teen Challenge, in Oklahoma, students told me, boys and men were called the Others.

The handbook warned against the act of “condoning”—the failure to report another student’s misbehavior. The staff often repeated a phrase from the Gospel of Luke: “Everything that is concealed will be brought to light and made known to all.” When students break rules, they are often assigned “Character Qualities,” such as gratefulness or reverence. They must write over and over a paragraph summarizing the attribute, citing Scripture, up to a hundred and fifty times. Another punishment, called Silence, outlaws communication among students, including “making gestures.” Depending on the center, this form of punishment is also known as Reflection or Talking Fast. Students given the discipline at some centers told me they had to wear ankle monitors or a yellow reflective vest.

As a Little Sister, Emma was put “on skirts”—she had to wear a knee-length skirt and flip-flops, to make it difficult to run away. Emma was informed that when girls ran away, or even spoke about the idea, their program was re-started, with two extra months added. She signed a “Civil Rights Waiver,” agreeing that Teen Challenge “may call the local sheriff’s office and/or police department (hereafter ‘Third Party’) if I am being rebellious and non-cooperative and such Third Party may handcuff me and take me away to juvenile detention.” (Teen Challenge no longer puts people “on skirts” or uses this waiver.)

When Brittany Hotte, who arrived at the school three months before Emma, was told about her status as a Little Sister, she asked her Big Sisters, “Is this a cult?” She said they exchanged glances and laughed. “I guess this is kind of like a cult,” one responded. Brittany’s parents had sent her to Teen Challenge after they discovered that she had been working at a brothel in Fort Lauderdale. Brittany, who was sixteen years old, quickly saw that the only way to move through the program was to conform. “I wish sometimes that I could brainwash myself,” she wrote in her journal. “I’m tired of not being able to control my dreams. It’s hard enough to control my thoughts when I’m awake.”

It was clear to Brittany that Emma had a long way to go. “When she got there, she was loud and defiant, and she just did not want to follow the rules,” Brittany told me. “I remember thinking to myself, She does not get it. That’s not how this works.”

For a week, Emma felt sluggish and sick in the mornings. She asked her Big Sisters for permission to speak, and, when they agreed, she said she was worried that she was pregnant. Her period was two weeks late. They assured her that, owing to the stress of Teen Challenge, everyone’s menstrual cycle got off track. “They just saw this little blond girl who has never done a drug in her life and looks like this sad little toy,” Emma said. “They were trained to believe that a Little Sister would lie.”

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After another week without her period, as Emma walked by a counsellor, she said, “I’m sorry—I know I’m not supposed to talk to anyone—but I’m pretty sure I’m pregnant.” The counsellor gave her a pregnancy test, instructing her to leave it on the bathroom sink and return to the classroom. After the school day, the same counsellor pulled Emma aside: the test was positive. “The first thing out of my mouth was ‘Can I have an abortion?’ ” Emma told me. “She looked shocked, and she said, ‘That’s not an option.’ ”

In 2001, Teen Challenge had taken over a building in Lakeland occupied by Help Unfortunate Girls, Inc., a home for women pregnant out of wedlock. The counsellor told Emma that the directors of the school—Greg Del Valle, a former Broward County deputy sheriff, and his wife, Essie—had spoken with Emma’s parents and formulated a plan. Like the women who had lived in the maternity home, Emma could carry her pregnancy to term and then give the baby up for adoption. The counsellor told Emma, “By God’s grace and His strong hand, this program is equipped to have a pregnant teen.”

“Well, you always wanted something from the Met.”

The directors instructed Emma to share her news. That night, twenty-eight girls gathered on couches in the living room. “I know I’ve been a lot to deal with,” Emma told everyone. “My emotions have been all over the place. That’s because I’m pregnant.” The directors allowed the girls a rare reprieve from the rule against touching. The directors’ daughter, who also worked there, embraced Emma. Then the other girls piled around them, and everyone hugged.

Students at Teen Challenge are permitted to talk on the phone with their parents once a week, for fifteen minutes. But Emma had lost this privilege, for talking too many times when she was supposed to be silent. The directors handled the communication with Emma’s parents and told Emma that they were committed to the adoption plan. She thought about running away, but didn’t even know what city she was in.

Emma was nearly six months pregnant when her phone privileges were restored, but she couldn't speak freely. Students prepared for their phone calls with a "3 x 5 card of topics to discuss," as the student handbook explained. A staff member sat next to them and took notes, to make sure that there was no talk about the "old life." Conversations had to follow the guidance provided by Ephesians 4:29: "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear." If the conversation touched on forbidden subjects, the staff member ended the call.

When Emma saw that there was no way for her to get an abortion, she began whispering to the other girls that she wanted to keep her baby. Emma had been born when her biological mother, who used drugs, was in jail. Emma had immediately been put in foster care, and she didn't want her child to grow up with the same sense of abandonment. "When anyone would even bring up my biological mother's name," Emma told me, "it was, like, 'Don't you dare talk about her to me.' There was just this oppressive feeling of unwantedness, but I couldn't identify the feelings for what they were."

For talking, Emma and several other girls were placed on "Relationship Restriction." Pairs of students who display "unhealthy behaviors" are told to act as if the other were dead. They must stay several feet apart, and eye contact is forbidden. Cambrie Elle Hall-Senn, one of Emma's classmates, told me, "Relationship Restriction was often used to keep girls who were openly gay—or presumed gay—from communicating. It was like their preemptive strike." McKaila Aguiar, who was sent to the Lakeland Teen Challenge because she'd had a relationship with a girl, said that the directors told her homosexuality was "a detestable sin" that would prevent her from finding love and fulfillment.

Emma's pregnancy was almost never acknowledged, though other girls could pray for the baby by touching her belly—an exemption from the no-touching rule. Emma's roommate Madison Koref, who told me that she had tried to run away on her second day at Teen Challenge and was put on Silence for nearly ten months, told me, "I used to pretend to pray over Emma, just because I wanted to be able to touch someone." Several students told me that they identified with Offred, the heroine of *The Handmaid's Tale*, who says, "I hunger to commit the act of touch."

At meals, the students were disciplined for leaving food on their plates. When Emma complained that certain foods were making her nauseous, a staff member named Izella Walls surreptitiously intervened. "I would walk by, put a napkin right underneath the table, and Emma would slip the food into my hand," Walls told me. "Sometimes, one of the other girls would call the staff to distract them from what Emma and I were trying to do."

Many of the employees at Teen Challenge have recently graduated from Teen Challenge programs themselves, becoming "lifers." Besides the directors, Walls was one of the few employees who had children. "They would always tell me, 'Take off your mother hat—stop

using your mother skills,’ ” Walls said. She tried to express her affection to the girls “in subtle ways that wouldn’t offend the staff.”

On a night shift, Walls brought Emma into a private conference room and pulled out a laptop that was connected to the Internet, which the girls were normally forbidden to access. Online, Emma found a residential Christian program in Fort Lauderdale for single mothers who wanted to go to school or to work while raising a baby. Emma made arrangements for the program to pick her up. All she needed was her parents’ signature, approving the transfer.

When Emma was seven months pregnant, she told Essie, the co-director, that she had found a program that would allow her to keep her baby. She said that Essie responded, “Go ahead—run it by your parents.” By the time she talked to her parents, at her scheduled weekly phone call, they had already been informed of the plan. They told Emma that they would not sign the form. They wanted her to get the full benefits of Teen Challenge.

Like all the residents’ parents, they had signed a contract unconditionally giving Teen Challenge control of their child. According to a 2020 version of the form, parents agreed “not to interfere with the custody or management of said minor in any way.” At a recent family orientation for the Lakeland Teen Challenge, which was recorded, the director, a young man who with his wife replaced the Del Valles when they retired, instructed parents not to believe their daughters when they complained about the program. “Know that, No. 1, that’s a lie,” he said. “It’s all a ploy,” he went on. “It’s all a tactic to wear you down, to get you to pull them out of the program.”

Every student at Teen Challenge is encouraged to read “The Cross and the Switchblade,” a memoir by David Wilkerson, the organization’s founder. The book, published in 1963, sold millions of copies in its first decade in print and was turned into a Hollywood movie, starring Pat Boone as Wilkerson. A white pastor in rural Pennsylvania, Wilkerson read an article in *Life*, in 1958, about a murder committed by adolescent gang members in Brooklyn. He could not get the story out of his mind. “I was dumbfounded by a thought that sprang suddenly into my head—full-blown,” he wrote. “*Go to New York City and help those boys.*”

He followed the command and drove east. He befriended teen-agers, many of them addicted to heroin, on the streets of Brooklyn and Harlem, sharing his wish for them to “begin life all over again, with the fresh and innocent personalities of newborn children.” Soon, he decided to move to the city, to become a “full-time gang preacher,” as he described it. In 1960, he established the first Teen Challenge center a few blocks from Fort Greene Park, in Brooklyn, opening the home to gang members, prostitutes, addicts, and other young outcasts. “We still get tempted,” a twelve-year-old there explained to a visitor. “But now when we do we always run into the chapel and pray.”

Wilkerson took a broad, undifferentiated view of addiction—any vice, or even sorrow, constituted grounds for admission. “We believe in the total cure of the total man!” Wilkerson wrote. “Only God can grant that kind of cure.” Wilkerson helped pastors and Christian leaders across the country open centers, which were eventually designated by age: there were recovery centers for adults and boarding schools for adolescents. “It’s almost like a franchise,” Wilkerson told the *Times*, in 1972. The newspaper praised Wilkerson for his “absolute model of simplicity, directness and total non-sophistication,” concluding that the program “worked where programs that were far more advanced and professional and costly often failed.”

In the nineteen-seventies, Teen Challenge was one of many treatment programs that eschewed a medical approach to addiction, a model that had produced disappointing results. Autocratic in structure, these therapeutic communities—the most famous one was Synanon, in California—emphasized rituals of spiritual cleansing, minimal contact with the outside world, and the exchange of personal stories, which tended to follow a similar arc: they began in sin and ended in redemption. But most of these communities were short-lived. They often took on cultlike dimensions—a shift that was perhaps inevitable, since their purpose was to control behavior and reeducate people.

Teen Challenge survived, possibly because it was working within an established spiritual tradition. It also benefitted from the support of conservative politicians, who embraced Wilkerson’s view of addiction as stemming from individual culpability, rather than from structural forces, such as unemployment, discrimination, and poverty. Ronald Reagan said, “I speak from more than twenty years of knowledge of the organization when I tell you that the Teen Challenge program works.” He added, “The government can’t do it alone, no matter how hard it tries.” In 1984, as part of her “Just Say No” campaign, Nancy Reagan visited a Teen Challenge center in Tennessee and posed for pictures with the residents.

A decade later, when a Texas regulatory agency threatened to shut down a Teen Challenge program in San Antonio because it did not comply with the state’s licensing and training requirements, George W. Bush, then the governor, sided with Teen Challenge, creating an exemption for faith-based programs. At Teen Challenge, adult residents often have to work at least forty hours a week, unpaid, which the organization says is training, to prepare them for the job market. Some work at thrift stores operated by the organization. Others do landscaping, wash cars, or work at warehouses or call centers. “If you don’t work, you don’t eat,” Bush said. “This is demanding love, a severe mercy.” Shane Thompson, Emma’s transporter, had once been the director of the Teen Challenge Men’s Center in Jacksonville, Florida, but he told me he was asked to leave after he expressed his disapproval over the residents’ being forced to work for free. “It sickened me, the way the men were being used as cheap labor—doing car washes, getting contracts to work with different companies,” he told me. “It was labor trafficking.”

When Bush became President, he appointed Henry Lozano, who had been the director of Teen Challenge in California for about a decade, to be one of his deputy assistants. He also made a hundred million dollars available for faith-based drug-treatment programs. “For the first time,” a White House press release announced, in 2004, “individuals seeking drug treatment can choose programs like Teen Challenge.”

Many of the students at Teen Challenge adolescent centers are not addicted to drugs. Some have never even tried them. These teens are what Joseph Spillane, a professor at the University of Florida who studies addiction history, describes as “pre-delinquent.” Wilkerson was a pioneer in his decision to apply the model of the therapeutic community to a new population: “suburban white kids who are not addicts in any real sense of the word,” Spillane said. “Teen Challenge does not get enough credit, if that’s the word, for really developing the foundations of the troubled-teen industry.”

Each year, some fifty thousand adolescents in the U.S. are sent to a constellation of residential centers—wilderness programs, boot camps, behavior-modification facilities, and religious treatment courses—that promise to combat a broad array of unwanted behaviors. There are no federal laws or agencies regulating these centers. In 2007, the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that, in the previous seventeen years, there had been thousands of allegations of abuse in the troubled-teen industry, and warned that it could not find “a single Web site, federal agency, or other entity that collects comprehensive nationwide data.” The next year, George Miller, a member of Congress from California, championed the Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act, which tried to create national safety standards and a system for investigating reports of abuse and neglect at the schools. But the law never passed the Senate. “Some schools are fraudulent in the kind of data they present to state agencies that theoretically have control over them,” Miller told me, “and they are fraudulent to parents about the level of punishment they impose.” There is a dearth of long-term mental-health-care facilities for youth, and, he said, the industry “off-loads a problem that the public system can’t manage.”

Versions of Miller’s bill have been introduced in Congress eight more times, but the legislation has never passed, and the basic problems with the industry remain largely unchanged. Malcolm Harsch, an attorney who is coördinating an American Bar Association committee devoted to reforming the industry, told me, “When programs get shut down because of allegations of abuse, they tend to disappear and then pop up again with new names, as if they were new facilities.”

Some Teen Challenge youth centers advertise themselves as places for students struggling with depression, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts, among other ailments, but students told me they seldom had access to trained mental-health counsellors. A student named Megan, who didn’t want me to use her last name, because she feared retaliation from Teen Challenge, told me that, in 2020, her parents drove her from a psychiatric hospital directly to a Teen Challenge in Lebanon, Indiana. She had to wear an ankle monitor for two weeks. “I

asked every person I met, ‘What is this place called?’ ” she said. “Can somebody please explain this to me?” In a journal that she kept throughout her time there, she described meeting an adviser she’d been assigned. “I was asking what my treatment plan is and she laughed and said ‘That’s not how we work here, you cooperate with the program,’ ” Megan wrote. In frustration, she threw a water bottle across the room. As punishment, she was put on Talking Fast for a week, during which time she tried to kill herself. She began tallying the number of times students tried to cut or harm themselves. “Since I’ve been here,” she wrote, “I’ve witnessed 13 suicide attempts not including my own.”

Some students told me that they were sent to Teen Challenge because their parents worried that they were gay. One girl said she was sent to a Teen Challenge in Disney, Oklahoma, because her family disapproved of her dating a boy who wasn’t white. Others were sent for forms of rebellion or distress that arose from childhood traumas. At a Teen Challenge in Kansas City, students were given self-improvement “projects.” A student with depression was told to carry a backpack with rocks in it for several days, so that she could feel how burdened she was by the past. Another, accused of being addicted to sex, was made to wear a belt attached to a soft weight, shaped like a belly, so that she’d know what pregnancy felt like. Quade Pike, a former student at the Teen Challenge in Disney, told me that nearly a quarter of the students in his program had been adopted from foreign countries. “What I saw was a bunch of A.D.H.D. boys who didn’t receive love from their parents,” he said.

Parents have wide legal latitude to raise their children as they please, and students at Teen Challenge have the same rights as they would have in their homes. But they are deprived of the kind of routine interactions with teachers, neighbors, doctors, and relatives who, when encountering signs of abuse, might intervene. Shane Thompson had rare access to these closed worlds, and he told me that, during the ten years he spent transporting teens to programs throughout the country, he became increasingly concerned about where he was taking his clients. He did two or three transports a week, and he began asking for tours of the facilities. “If I saw a juvenile in a sling or a cast—if it looked like they’d been tackled by somebody—I would file a grievance,” he told me. He filed an average of one grievance a week with the state agency responsible for children’s welfare.

“The crazy thing is it sold for over a million.”

Since 1984, Florida has allowed religious schools and day cares to apply for exemption from government regulation. These facilities are instead overseen by the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a private body whose leadership is filled with people who run Christian schools. Only when there are allegations of abuse or neglect at these schools does Florida’s Department of Children and Families have the authority to intervene. In the past thirteen years, the agency has conducted five investigations into the Lakeland Teen Challenge, after allegations of abuse including “bizarre punishment,” “mental injury,” and

“physical injury, asphyxiation.” In the mental-injury incident, the department referred the case to the Polk County Sheriff’s Office, but, after interviewing two students on school premises, the sheriff’s office said it found “no evidence to support the claim.”

When Thompson learned that Emma was pregnant (after doing another transport to the Lakeland Teen Challenge), he reported his concern to the Department of Children and Families. “I knew that program was not suitable for a pregnant lady,” he told me. Thompson assumed that the agency would interview Emma, but she never heard from it, and there is no record of an investigation. Thompson said that, when the directors of the Lakeland Teen Challenge began suspecting him of filing complaints, they stopped letting him come inside.

In her seventh month of pregnancy, Emma was cast as Mary in the school’s Nativity play. “They really leaned into me playing the role, because I was the physical manifestation of all that she had been through,” Emma told me.

The girls often went to different churches, to tell their stories and ask for money for Teen Challenge. The tuition at the time was roughly thirty thousand dollars a year, but some students received scholarships, either from the state—the school has encouraged families to apply to a Florida program that funds the education of students with disabilities—or from donations. At these events, Emma felt like a celebrity. “They would parade me around,” she said. “I was the prodigal child, the whore. I felt used for my story, but I also liked the attention. I was, like, ‘I don’t care—I will wear that crown.’ ” When going to church, she had to wear a T-shirt that read “Teen Challenge Runaway,” with the telephone number for the center printed on the back, as a preventive measure. (At other centers, students thought to be at risk of escape are required to wear orange jumpsuits.)

During one church event, a pastor walked up to Emma and, unprompted, told her the Bible story of the judgment of Solomon, about two women arguing over a baby that they both claimed was their own. King Solomon suggested that they split the baby in two, and, when one of the women instead offered to give the baby up, he declared her the rightful mother. “The pastor told me, ‘I see a spirit of Solomon over you,’ ” Emma said. “ ‘You will not keep this child. You will give him away.’ ” After the encounter, she said that the directors “rode on that wave. They would say, ‘Who are you going to be in the story?’ ”

A lawyer named Deborah Carroll, who now works for the Building Families Adoption Agency, in Lakeland, guided Emma through the adoption process. Emma chose a family whom her parents knew indirectly and who she believed would agree to an open adoption, allowing her to see her child. She assumed that Carroll was her personal attorney, advocating on her behalf. But Carroll told me that she “does not and has never represented any birth mother in an adoption.”

One night, Emma dreamed that Jesus sat on a rock beside her and told her he was using her, just as he had used Mary, to bring a child into the world. She woke up feeling vulnerable and afraid. When she saw Essie, the co-director, in the hallway, she told her about the dream. “Essie told me I had the gift of dreams, and God was using my gifts to communicate his purpose to me,” Emma said. That night, when all the girls gathered in the living room, Emma shared her dream with everyone, at Essie’s instruction. “It was like I spoke the idea into existence,” she said. “They made me feel I had so much power that I had no other option. It got to the point that I felt that, because I had this dream from God, I had to give my child to another family.”

Madison Koref, Emma’s roommate, said that she was so moved by Emma’s public expressions of faith that, after resisting Jesus for several months, she decided to try believing, too. “When you have a child, you want your partner there, holding your hand,” she said. “Because Emma didn’t have that, she felt better thinking, Well, Jesus is my partner. He will be there.”

A week after Emma played Mary in the Nativity play, she asked if she could skip gym class. She was eight months pregnant and exhausted. But she was informed that if she didn’t participate she would have to go back to bed, and, if she did that, an extra day would be added to her program—the policy at that time. Molly Fitzpatrick, who worked at the Lakeland Teen Challenge until 2020, told me, “When students have medical needs, the staff see it as malingering. They think the girls are just trying to get out of their day-to-day life.”

Emma joined the gym class; when the other girls ran, she walked. That evening, the girls were allowed to watch a G-rated movie. Brittany said, “There was a spot of blood on the couch, and I went to the staff and said, ‘Emma needs to go to the hospital. She’s bleeding. I don’t think that’s normal.’ But their response was, basically, ‘You need to stop talking or you’re going to get in trouble.’ ” Emma moved to the floor so that she wouldn’t stain the couch.

The next day, a staff member took Emma to the doctor. Emma’s blood pressure was elevated. When the doctor asked Emma if she was anxious, she shook her head. “I just said everything they wanted me to say,” Emma told me. “I never got a moment alone with a nurse to say, ‘Hey, this isn’t what I want. I don’t want to give my baby away.’ ”

After a diagnosis of severe gestational hypertension, Emma was given medication to induce labor. But when her contractions began she didn’t feel she had the energy to endure the pain. She had not received any lessons about how to give birth. “I was pretty much emotionally dead,” she said. “I remember lying there, dripping in sweat, and I finally said, ‘I don’t care what it takes—I just want this to be over with.’ ” The doctor offered her a Cesarean section, and, at ten-fifteen the next morning, she gave birth to a boy.

According to Florida law, birth mothers must wait forty-eight hours before formally consenting to an adoption. Emma was allowed to spend those two days with her son. “I don’t even want to say that motherly bond was there—because I don’t really know what that is,” Emma told me. “It was an estranged love. I felt unworthy, like I was loving someone who wasn’t mine to love.”

The Teen Challenge house had a small unoccupied room for staff, and Emma hoped she might be able to bring her son back and live with him there. But, whenever she hinted that she wanted to bring up her baby, she said, Essie told her, “Think about your calling. Think about this family. Think about why God chose you to bless them.”

Two days after the birth, two lawyers with the adoption agency arrived at the hospital with a contract for Emma to sign, surrendering her parental rights. She began communicating in a baby voice. “Whenever someone would talk to me, I would give a goofy grin and a half-witted response,” she said. “I was giddy and dissociated from the severity of the situation.” She had never done drugs, but she imagined that this was what it was like to be high. “I was clearly in shock and traumatized, but no one was looking at that.” (The Del Valles did not return numerous messages and calls asking for comment.)

The meeting with the lawyers was delayed a few hours so that Emma could regain her composure. Then, in a conference room at the hospital, she sat at a table with her parents, the directors of Teen Challenge, and the two lawyers. One of the lawyers turned on an audio recorder and asked Emma if she was being blackmailed or placed under duress, a standard question. Emma shook her head, sobbing. She cried for the entire meeting. She said that Essie told her, “This is the same pain that God felt when he gave us His son. We are reaping so many rewards from this sacrifice.”

Emma returned to Teen Challenge two days later. All the girls there had been put on Reflection. Walls, the counsellor, said, “We told the entire house, ‘Don’t ask her any questions. If we see a mouth moving, you just broke a rule.’ ” If students wanted to show Emma their concern, Walls said, they had the option of smiling, waving, or giving a thumbs-up. Some of the girls had made a “Welcome Home” banner for Emma, but a staff member took it away, because she was on Relationship Restriction with a few of the students who had signed it.

Emma had to be silent, too. She was told to sleep on a couch in the living room that night, presumably to give her some privacy. But she felt as if she had been banished. She spent the night sobbing. Madison said, “I remember lying in bed and just listening to her wailing, ‘I want my baby!’ ” Madison was so shaken that, in the following days, she began seeing ghosts of pregnant girls in the hallway. “I told one of the staff members, and she said, ‘Oh, well, this used to be a home for mothers, so that probably explains what you’re seeing.’ ”

A few days later, the directors told Emma that she needed to start the program over again. Katy Prince, a staff member who was then twenty-four, said, “The reasoning was that she hadn’t been able to do the program appropriately when she was pregnant, so now she needed to redo the whole thing. I didn’t agree with it, but at that time I was very timid.” Emma felt as if the past nine months had been erased, as if she’d never had a child at all.

In the mornings and evenings, the staff often dimmed the lights in the living room and played Christian music. Emma found herself letting go of her inhibitions. “I’d be on my knees, bawling, and then the other girls would start doing it,” she said. “It was presented as if we were becoming vulnerable to God—I was told I had a gift for worship—but I think it was actually all of us feeling overwhelmed and oppressed and stuck. It was a collective cry session.” Sometimes Emma would speak in tongues, a practice encouraged by the Assemblies of God. “It made me feel free and powerful, but I also knew that I was being watched,” she said. “It was, like, ‘Please see this. Please validate that I am experiencing God, and He is real.’ ”

Every week, at different churches, Emma was asked to give her testimony, the story of her son’s adoption, in the form of a poem. She told the story so many times that the plot points no longer seemed connected to her. “To give him the best life, adoption is the only way,” she recited. “I was the one who was the prodigal daughter / But I turned right around and went straight to my Father.” After her performance, a collection plate was passed, the proceeds of which went to Teen Challenge. Other students selected to share their stories typically had personal histories involving rape, murder, or dramatic abandonment. Shea Vassar, one of Emma’s classmates, told me that she was rarely asked to give her testimony. “I was just some depressed kid who didn’t want to go to school,” she said.

In the past decade, there have been several lawsuits against Teen Challenge. One mother sued for negligence, because her son was abruptly discharged from a Teen Challenge, in Jacksonville, for breaking a rule, and died of an overdose that night. This year, a student named Amaya Rasheed filed a lawsuit against Teen Challenge of Oklahoma, alleging that she was “physically restrained against her will” until she couldn’t breathe, and was denied medical care. (The director of Rasheed’s center said, “We remain confident that our actions are consistent with our First Amendment rights to honor our Lord and our legal obligations under Oklahoma and Federal law.”) Former employees have sued, too: a staff member in Georgia alleged that he was fired after he revealed that he had been hospitalized for depression; an employee in Oregon sued because she was terminated, on the ground of “moral failure,” for getting pregnant out of wedlock.

But these lawsuits almost never go to trial, because staff and residents (or their parents) sign a contract waiving the “right to file a lawsuit in any civil court.” Instead, the contract says that their “sole remedy” for any dispute will be “Biblically based mediation” or Christian conciliation, a type of legal arbitration. A *Times* investigation in 2015 found that religious-

arbitration clauses, like the one used at Teen Challenge, have created “an alternate system of justice” that is often “impervious to legal challenges” and obstructs families not only from suing but from gathering facts.

Teen Challenge has been in operation for more than sixty years, but there is little public record of what occurs in its facilities. A kind of collective amnesia is fostered not only by the contract but by the culture. Once students leave some programs, their friends are not allowed to refer to them by name. Jasmine Smith, who worked at the Lakeland Teen Challenge until last winter, told me, “We had to refer to people who left the program as ‘a past student’ or ‘a past staff.’” Fitzpatrick, the former staff member, said that she was forbidden to communicate with employees who had resigned or been fired. She had to unfriend them on Facebook. Fitzpatrick worries that Teen Challenge will prevent her from getting new jobs, and she told me, “Even doing this interview, I’m shaking—I didn’t realize the fear.”

In May, 2020, Naomi Wood, a student at the Lakeland Teen Challenge, died. She had been throwing up, almost constantly, for more than twenty-four hours. On the last day of her life, Naomi, who was born in Liberia and adopted by a family in Vermont, stayed in bed, and the staff left her alone for long stretches without checking on her, according to students and staff I interviewed. She was found in her bed, having fallen into what appeared to be a coma. A staff member called an ambulance, but on the way to the hospital she died after having a seizure, though it’s still unclear what led to it. “Medical evaluation is consistent with delay in seeking care and medical neglect,” a report by the Florida Department of Children and Families read. After Naomi’s death, her closest friends said, they were put on Relationship Restriction. Fitzpatrick, the former staff member, told me, “We weren’t allowed to have memorials for her, because they didn’t want the girls reflecting on the past.” Smith said, “It felt as if her passing was swept under the rug.” (A lawyer for Teen Challenge denied that students were discouraged from discussing the past, that Naomi’s friends were put on Relationship Restriction, and that employees couldn’t communicate with former staff members. He also said that Teen Challenge doesn’t restrict students’ eye contact, or their distance from one another, and that the Florida centers do “not use this concept of ‘Silence.’”))

The Polk County Sheriff’s Office investigated Naomi’s death, but no charges were brought. The current directors of the center, a young couple, Dan and Holly Williams, who had taken over after the Del Valles left, responded to the death by creating the position of medical coordinator, which Holly, who graduated from a program that prepares people for leadership positions at Teen Challenge, is filling. Dan Williams had no comment on the finding of medical neglect. Naomi’s death was “an inexplicable tragedy,” he told me, adding that he encouraged students to talk about it during counselling sessions. “Our hearts are encouraged that she had a relationship with her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,” he said. “Even though her time on this earth ended prematurely, our hearts are filled with gratitude for the time we did have with her.”

When I first began speaking with Emma, last spring, she assumed that she was the only student at Teen Challenge who had been forced to give a child up for adoption. But, in my interviews with more than sixty former students and staff, it became clear that her story was not unique. Help Unfortunate Girls, Inc., had been run by a Republican socialite who, according to a 1995 article in the Tampa *Tribune*, had often boasted about “how many babies they had ‘saved.’” When Teen Challenge took over the property, it seems to have continued the mission. (The lawyer representing Teen Challenge said, “The program has no records” of Emma’s being forced to give up her child for adoption, adding, “Teen Challenge does not provide counsel regarding adoption. Any concerns related to youth pregnancy are handled by the parents with their child.”)

Deanna Doucette was the first pregnant girl to attend the home after Teen Challenge took over. She arrived in 2001, when she was fourteen. A few weeks from her due date, she snuck out of a window and ran away to a gas station, where she called her boyfriend, the father of her child. But before help arrived the police showed up and returned her to Teen Challenge. In the car, she told the officers, “Don’t take me back—they’re forcing me to give away my baby.” Five months were added to her program at Teen Challenge, for running away.

Several months after giving up her child, Deanna was assigned a Little Sister, Amber Foster, who was seventeen and pregnant. Amber had been ordered to the Lakeland Teen Challenge by a court, for “runaway behavior.” She was aware that her Big Sister had given up her child for adoption, but, she told me, “I never knew what her intention had been, because there was no conversation about it, even in the whispers of the night.” Amber was determined to keep her baby, but she said that the directors at that time—they are now the directors of a Teen Challenge in Seale, Alabama—told her, “Just like Mary gave up her son, you’re making this ultimate sacrifice.”

As soon as Amber surrendered her son, she tried to withdraw her consent for the adoption. But her movements were so controlled that she was unable to mail a form that allowed her to revoke her consent up to five days after relinquishing her rights. Seven weeks later, she left Teen Challenge—she had turned eighteen, and the juvenile court no longer had jurisdiction over her case. She immediately tried to file a petition with the circuit court that had handled her adoption, saying that she had given up her son “under duress” and “by means of deception.” By the time her petition was received, though, the window for challenging the legitimacy of the adoption had closed. “I still think about it every day,” she told me. “My child was stolen from me.”

Five years later, Samantha Oscar, a student at the Lakeland Teen Challenge, watched her best friend go through the same experience. She is still haunted by the way her friend sobbed after returning from the hospital without her child. “They had told her, ‘If you don’t

give up your child, you are bringing shame on yourself,' ” she said. “Once she did, they just tried to act like it didn’t happen. It was, like, ‘Move on, forget your daughter. She’s not yours.’ ”

Every year, Emma writes an e-mail to her son on his birthday. She isn’t allowed to contact him—his adoptive parents did not end up permitting a relationship, as she had hoped—but she has created a Gmail address to which she sends her letters. After her son becomes a legal adult, she plans to give him the password to the account, so he can read all the messages. In the e-mails, she expresses her love, reminisces about how he responded to her voice when he was in the womb, and jokes about which subjects in school (writing, not math) she might be able to help him with. When he was four years old she wrote, “I wish I could describe to you what it’s like to miss someone you’ve known only for a brief moment.”

As soon as Emma graduated from Teen Challenge, she joined a church affiliated with the Assemblies of God, becoming a worship leader. “I was stuck in this mind-set of doing whatever Teen Challenge thought was the right thing,” she said. She repeatedly applied for jobs at Teen Challenge, but she was never hired. Instead, she supported herself by working as a florist and at a call center. She and another leader at church got married and, in 2015, when she was nineteen, she discovered that she was pregnant. She contemplated an abortion, but, when she told her friends from church that she didn’t feel equipped to raise a child yet, they told her, “Well, no one is ready to have a kid.”

After she gave birth, to a daughter, she fell into a suicidal depression. “My daughter was the sweetest, smartest, fieriest little thing, but I didn’t feel a bond with her,” she told me. “I had gone through this experience of completely extinguishing all my maternal feelings, and I felt like I was incapable of love.” In a letter to her son, she wrote, “I don’t think there is a single soul I know that understands how I feel. Caged, incapable, silenced.”

A therapist who was trained as a Christian counsellor recommended that she tackle her depression by going to an adult Teen Challenge, in Davie, Florida. Emma called Brittany Hotte, her closest friend from Teen Challenge, and asked if she could borrow money for the program. Brittany told her, “For the love of God, you absolutely cannot do that.” A few years earlier, Brittany had graduated from a Teen Challenge leadership program, but she had become disillusioned by the cultlike aspects of the organization. When she eventually left, she realized that she had no formal education or training, and, because she felt shunned for her decision to exit Teen Challenge, she couldn’t even ask her former teachers for a job reference. She felt that she had been a “pawn in their industry,” she said. But, she added, “at Teen Challenge, I had very vivid experiences where I felt I encountered God, and that’s been the most complicated part—untangling what I actually believe.”

Emma met with Greg and Essie Del Valle, the directors of Teen Challenge when she was there, and asked for their advice. “Greg put his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘I equipped you to leave a warrior. Why are you being defeated right now?’ ” she told me. She felt as if

she was being blamed for her depression. “I walked away from that meeting feeling like I knew nothing,” she said. “I was doing everything they wanted me to, and I was still miserable. That was the start of feeling like, These people don’t care.”

She drifted away from her church community. “I don’t feel like I belong anywhere,” she wrote in her journal. “Not with the mothers . . . not with the church.” She tried to see her life in new terms, without the lurking fear of eternal punishment. “Literally, my fear was bursting in flames and being left behind in the Rapture,” she said. She moved out of her husband’s house—he kept custody of their daughter, but Emma still visited—and into an apartment with her best friend and her friend’s boyfriend. For the first time in years, she told her son in a letter, she was “surrounded by people who love me.”

On her son’s ninth birthday, in 2020, she wrote, “I have finally started talking about it . . . about the pain of giving you away against my will.” She found herself feeling sympathy for her biological mother, who had gone through periods of incarceration and homelessness and was so removed from any medical support system that, Emma assumed, abortion would not have felt like an option. Emma tried to search for her, even hiring a private investigator, but her mother had left few traces. “What kind of softened my heart to her was seeing the parallels in our stories,” Emma told me. “We were two generations of women who were, in some form or fashion, limited in our freedom to decide to be mothers.” ♦

This article has been updated to obscure identifying details.
