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IVY RIDGE AMONG SCHOOLS NAMED IN NEGLIGENCE CLAIM BY 26

Relates to:
World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools
Academy at Ivy Ridge
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Chris Garifo
Watertown Daily Times

Twenty-six former students and their parents have filed a lawsuit in Los Angeles against the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools and its affiliated schools, including the Academy at Ivy Ridge.

Among the plaintiffs are Diana Kelley and her son, Eric, who was enrolled at Ivy Ridge, on State Route 37 just outside the Ogdensburg city limits, from October 2002 through April 2003. The Kelleys are New Jersey residents.

The lawsuit against Utah-based WWASPS and several of its affiliated schools, including Ivy Ridge, a behavioral modification facility for troubled teens, was filed in late May in California Superior Court for Los Angeles County. The case was assigned to Judge Ralph W. Dau.

The suit accuses WWASPS and its schools of negligence, negligent child abuse, breach of contract, fraud, intentional infliction of emotional distress, breach of fiduciary duty, false imprisonment, assault and battery, negligent medical care and conspiracy.

It claims Ivy Ridge "is one of many institutions owned and operated by the defendants where adolescents are impounded, tortured, berated, brainwashed, and otherwise abused by the defendants."

In the Kelleys' case, the lawsuit claims that Ivy Ridge lied about what it would do for the boy and then physically and mentally abused him while depriving him of needed medical care.

Academy Director Jason G. Finlinson said he has not seen a copy of the filing but says the accusations against Ivy Ridge that are included in the lawsuit are groundless and he is not overly concerned about the legal action.

"If you look at the lawsuit, every kid says the same thing about every school," he said. "It's kind of a boilerplate."

Mr. Finlinson said he remembers Mr. Kelley and rejects the boy's allegations, including that he was deprived of necessary medical care.

"We do not buy that," Mr. Finlinson said. "The kid got every treatment he needed."

The lawsuit seeks undetermined compensatory and punitive damages.

WWASPS in the past has faced such lawsuits against it and other current and former affiliated schools but has never lost any of them.

The plaintiffs are represented by the law firms of Edward Masry, Westlake Village, Calif.; and Henry I. Bushkin, Los Angeles. Mr. Masry was the attorney most well known from the movie "Erin Brockovich" starring Julia Roberts. Calls to the law firms seeking comment were not returned Wednesday.

This is the first lawsuit known to have been brought against Ivy Ridge, which opened in 2001 on the 237-acre campus of the former Mater Dei College. However, the office of New York State Attorney General Eliot L. Spitzer has been looking into Ivy Ridge's business practices, including its granting of diplomas. As a result of that probe, the school stopped advertising that it issues diplomas and its accreditation by the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools was suspended.

The state police in May confirmed that it was investigating allegations of physical abuse involving students at the Ivy Ridge, however no charges have been brought against any of the school's staff of approximately 150.

The state Office of Children and Family Services earlier this year also opened an investigation of abuse allegations at Ivy Ridge but determined that it lacked jurisdiction and ended its probe.

In May, 12 Ivy Ridge students were accused of rioting, assault and other charges after a late-night melee in which 30 students escaped from the campus. Within a few hours all of the escapees were rounded up.

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