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Family wins fight to remove teen from Tranquility Bay

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After a six month battle in court, Gini Farmer got her 13 year-old cousin 'John' out of Tranquility Bay in Jamaica and back into the United States under court order. Farmer's story is posted on helpyourteens.com, with a warning to parents that such 'behavioural modification facilities' may in reality be a living hell for teenagers.

WHAT goes on behind the closed doors of Tranquility Bay, St Elizabeth has remained a well kept secret for years, even after a 16-year old girl fell to her death last year.

But in August this year, operations at Tranquility Bay were brought to the fore in a United States court, when the family of a 13 year-old boy tried to get him out of the facility and back to the United States.

Gini Farmer, the boy's cousin, told a Virginia court that his father had sent him to Jamaica, in February, handcuffed and in the middle of the night. The entire report is posted on helpyourteens.com.

In a letter to TeenAge, Farmer said that she was alerted to John's disappearance when relatives went to pick up the boy at his home and was told he was sent to a "behavioural modification facility' in Jamaica. John was only 12 at the time, she said. His father had just remarried, his mother had died when he was two.

Farmer checked the website for more information on Tranquility Bay, a Worldwide Association of Speciality Schools/Teen Help/Adolescent Services Inc. Programme.

"The on-line brochure looked wonderful," she said. The information spoke glowingly of a help facility that could turn your defiant teen into a compliant teen. But further checks, turned up stories of unsanitary conditions, uneducated staff, horrible abuse and "medical, emotional and psychological damage to the children to whom they were supposed to be offering help".

What serious offence had John committed to warrant such treatment? To find out, Farmer and her family tried to get a character profile of John from his neighbours, teachers, coaches, family and friends.

Their general description of John was of a "comic with a quick smile; good athlete, generally polite and helpful. He was described by some as hard-headed, some were worried about his droopy pants and boots without laces and almost everyone agreed that John had no great love for the woman his father had met only seven months before and decided to marry."

Further, Farmer said, "he had slipping grades and had been in trouble for kicking a locker, being disrespectful to a teacher and skipping school once, leaving early without permission once..."

Nothing indicated that he was into drugs or significant illegal activity, which is the case for many of Tranquility Bay's residents.

But since John's father would not sign the papers to allow Farmer to investigate the facility, much less bring him home, she decided to take the matter to court. To win, under Virginia's laws she first had to prove John was in danger of being abused or neglected, but not being able to communicate with him made that impossible, she said.

And there were other obstacles:

1) social services said they could not protect a child who was not within their jurisdiction.

2) juvenile and domestic court did not consider children's rights even though the Supreme Court upheld such rights under the constitution since the 1930'.

3) International social services and the State Department could not help until they had legal guardianship of the boy.

4) Parental rights in the system and in court, seemed to take precedence over children's legal or even constitutional rights.

5) Lawyers were generally unwilling to take on the case.

The American consulate in Jamaica did pay a visit to the facility, on Farmer's behalf but, she said, "they would not give us any written confirmation they were sure they had seen our boy."

Farmer lost the case in juvenile and domestic court, so she appealed to Virginia's Circuit Court. They had six weeks to find witnesses -- persons who had been released and this proved difficult.

"I was at my wits end. I had spoken to kids who were scared to testify, parents who didn't feel their children were up to helping in this capacity or whose kids were in summer school trying to catch up and couldn't get away."

Then, within a couple of weeks three boys who had got out within the last six months, called and offered to testify, she said.

One of them was 19 year-old Aaron Kravig who told the circuit court of Tazawell county that he wrote, in all, 74 5000-word essays and later contracted scabies from bathing in dirty showers. The scabies remained untreated for eight months until he returned home in the United States, he said.

"I believe I got scabies from the showers, by showering in them and yeah, they're unsanitary, filthy ...showers had dirt, grime, filth on the sides."

Another witness, Lindsey Wise, 18, sent there for doing drugs, said there was sewage on the floors and bugs crawling all over. He said once he complained that there was no exercise, and "the director assigned us to do 5000 jumping jacks and 3000 crunches and 200 push ups three times a day, and if we did not do it, we were restrained."

Restraining, according to both boys was a regular occurrence. It was a painful form of punishment and screams could often be heard up until late at nights. Boys were restrained, Wise said, when they were forced to lie face down on the floor, their arms twisted behind their backs, and their feet held onto the floor while staff kneeled or sat on their back.

Wise confirmed this in his testimony.

He said he also saw on August 10, 2001, Valerie Herron jump off the third story building to kill herself.

The girl was wrapped in towels and taken to the hospital, he said, but one of the towels, Kravig claimed was his. "I had a spot of blood about the size of a dinner plate on my towel (and) there was some of her hair on it."

The three testimonials provided sufficient evidence and the judge ordered John's immediate return.

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