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Mom pulls twins from Eagle Point after riot

by Mollie Reeves
The Mississippi Press

LUCEDALE -- Christy Depasquale has her twin 17-year-old sons at home with her in Oklahoma after they spent more than a month at Eagle Point Christian Academy, formerly known as Bethel Boys Academy.

Depasquale was concerned for the boys' welfare after hearing of the riot that took place at Eagle Point last weekend. During the riot, windows were broken, bunks overturned and a barrack was trashed.

Seven students were transported to a hospital for treatment, and six others were taken into custody for disorderly conduct.

Depasquale said she followed her instincts and, escorted by a George County sheriff's deputy, arrived at Eagle Point around 2 a.m. on Friday to retrieve her sons.

Depasquale said her sons were "very relieved to be coming home."

"It's not a good place," she said of Eagle Point.

Repeated phone calls Friday to Eagle Point director John Fountain were not returned.

Depasquale's sons reportedly had "plenty of bruises and cuts and scrapes" when she picked them up. One of the boys reportedly has a bruise on his back where an Eagle Point staff member allegedly

"grabbed him and slammed his fist in his back" because he was talking.

Depasquale said Eagle Point uses "hazing-type discipline tactics." The twins reportedly have scrapes on their knees from being made to kneel on a hardwood floor for long periods of time when they got into trouble.

The boys reported that the riot was really destructive and the "kids just went berserk."

Depasquale's sons were two of four boys that ran away from the home on Sunday after the riot. They were picked up and returned to the home the same day. "They were scared. They wanted to get out of there," Depasquale said.

The twins also told their mother that the kitchen of Eagle Point was infested with roaches and rats, and that if there was trouble during mealtime, the boys either couldn't finish eating or were given 30 seconds to finish their meal.

The boys also alleged that when the kids got into fights, the staff members would just ignore it and leave the room. One of Depasquale's sons was in a fight, and the brothers said the instructors just stood by and watched.

The boys also told their mother that mace was being used frequently at Eagle Point when anybody steps out of line.

Depasquale said she felt Eagle Point was misrepresented to parents. She said they didn't provide a 100 percent safe and secure environment, there's a lack of supervision, and the education is not what it should be.

Depasquale said their family representative, Ada Gunter was a wonderful person. "I really felt she did care," she said.

An improvement plan for Eagle Point was established at a hearing in George County Youth Court on Thursday. The court adopted a plan of improvement recommended by the state and by Eagle Point.

The documents from the hearing are sealed, but one step in the plan has already been implemented by Eagle Point with the hiring of the Mississippi Security Police, a private firm, to provide security services for the academy. The Mississippi Security Police were called after the riot and have been present at the facility since last weekend.

"I hope the actions that were taken will prevent future problems," District Attorney Tony Lawrence said.

Lawrence said he had certain concerns he wanted to see addressed including kids escaping and kids being injured.

"The hiring of a security firm will certainly go a long way to alleviating a lot of problems we've seen in the past," he said.

Lawrence said he could not confirm case-by-case allegations against Eagle Point, but allegations made to him will be investigated. "Any matter alleged to be of criminal activity will be investigated and presented to a grand jury," he said.

George County Youth Court Prosecutor Mark Maples said the recommendation of the court were to "ensure the safety and security of the students as well as the community."

Officials agreed that the issue of security needed reconsidered, Maples said.

George County Sheriff Garry Welford said he felt the plan "would be good for the security of the kids and for the community."

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