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Are Troubled Teens Tortured?

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TUESDAY, JUNE 23, 2009

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Yesterday, we brought you the story of [Matthew Meyer](#), a troubled teen who died at a wilderness camp. Today, we bring you the story of Nick Gaglia.

Gina Kaysen Fernandes: Imagine a world where your child is locked away for years, spending days at a time in a windowless room. Communication is shut off and you have no way of knowing about their treatment, which may include being physically restrained for hours on end. This horrifying scenario isn't prison -- it's a voluntary program aimed at treating **troubled teenagers**.

It's a place where Nick Gaglia spent two and a half years, because "my life was spinning out of control." The residential **treatment program** known as "Kids of North Jersey" in Secaucus, New Jersey, "seemed like a great fit," says Nick, who was abusing drugs and alcohol at the age of 13. Nick's [parents](#) saw advertisements for the program on television and soon enrolled their son. They hoped professionals would get Nick clean and sober so he could put his life back on track. But instead of giving Nick the coping skills he'd need in the outside world, he became a prisoner subjected to verbal abuse, psychological torment, and physical restraint. "I would call it torture and abuse," says Nick, who shared his harrowing ordeal with momlogic.

Cut Off from Society

Nick described spending most days at the facility in a large, windowless room. Teens sitting in blue plastic chairs would be forced to confess stories of their sordid past. If Nick didn't cooperate, staff members would berate him, hold him facedown on the floor, or throw him into **isolation**. During his lengthy lockup, Nick was restrained more than 100 times lasting up to 12 hours. In order to gain release, he'd have to sign a forced confession, admitting he'd become physically violent even though he never hit anyone. Sleep and food deprivation were also common during his experience, which sounds more like lockdown at Guantanamo Bay than group therapy. "The hardest part for me was being separated from my family," says Nick, who was told repeatedly that he could never contact anyone who didn't support his sobriety.



Nick was literally cut off from society and trapped in an underground cult-like community. He received no education and all books were banned. Nick calls the therapy sessions "a form of brainwashing" aimed at convincing him that leaving the program would cause him to relapse and die. His mother also underwent the same type of brainwashing in the facility's parent support groups. She feared for her son's life if she pulled him out of the program.



Sexual Assault, Physical Injuries, Medical Neglect -- Even Death

It may seem hard to believe that a place like this could operate for years with impunity. But what goes on behind closed doors in these privately owned and operated facilities goes largely unregulated. The long arm of the law can't reach into many private juvenile justice facilities and **boarding schools** because they're exempt from state licensing. Federal agencies don't have the legal authority to hold states accountable for the mistreatment of kids in private programs that don't receive federal funds.

The terrorizing tactics used at Kids of North Jersey are hardly unique, according to an extensive study conducted by the Government Accountability Office. The GAO found thousands of alleged incidences of abuse, including sexual assault, physical injuries, and medical neglect. Some of these cases resulted in hospitalizations and even death. "We looked at thousands of allegations and new information is flooding in from parents," says Greg Kutz, the managing director of Forensic Audits and Special Investigations at the Government Accountability Office. The use of physical restraint is one of the most egregious and troubling forms of discipline. "Kids have died from facedown restraint, when their breathing gets restricted," says Kutz.

While the studies sound damning, there are still many success stories. Supporters of troubled teen programs credit the industry with saving people's lives. Industry experts urge parents to ask professionals to make referrals, so their child ends up in a reputable program. "The teenager should be screened by a licensed mental health professional that has experience working with these programs," says Michael Conner, Psy.D., a licensed psychologist who regularly makes referrals. Doctor Conner adds, "I've been involved in reporting and shutting down five programs. I'm not a supporter of all programs."

Parents are often misinformed about how long it takes for a successful outcome. "A 30-day residential treatment program only works for about 10% of the kids," says Conner. Most teens can



expect to spend more than a year at a facility. These programs aren't a quick fix, especially for teens with severe problems. "Most programs won't tell you up front that months of follow-up treatment will be needed for success," Conner cautions.

Haunted by the Experience

Nick Gaglia never had a release date. Instead, in 1998, he had a revelation: "I believed I was trapped and I knew they were telling me lies." He describes how he "felt an energy that gave me the strength to escape." Nick broke free on the George Washington Bridge by jumping out of a car while stopped in traffic. Police witnessed the commotion and took Nick into custody. After he explained his situation, the authorities released him.

After returning home at the age of 17, Nick admits to using drugs again, harder than before, but he eventually went cold turkey. "It's in spite of the program that I'm sober, not because of it," says Nick, who credits his recovery to pursuing his passion for filmmaking. He eventually enrolled in film [school](#) and wrote and directed a [feature-length movie](#) based on his experience.

The New Jersey facility eventually shut down after a barrage of civil lawsuits for false imprisonment and [child abuse](#). "But a lot of the people involved with these places are never convicted," says Kutz. He adds, "This allows these organizations to reinvent themselves and re-emerge as another facility."

Nick is still haunted by his experience at KNJ. He suffers from nightmares and flashbacks similar to a war veteran. He hopes his film raises awareness about the troubled teen industry. "I felt like no one knew what was going on, because if they did, someone would have done something about it."

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While Nick's story sounds like a great movie it does sound a bit dramatic. Having worked at a boarding school and wilderness camp some of what he said is true. If a student is trying to hurt themselves or others they will be restrained. Trust me, restraining a kid that is trying to hurt themselves isn't fun. These kids are coming from homes where both parents work and don't give a damn about them. They've come from a history of neglect (hence the drug use).

- Troubled Teen

Posted 06/23/09 11:04 AM

But they're not talking about normal boarding camps, they're talking about the extreme ones that are abusing the teens that have come for help, that one psychologist in the story admits to having helped close down 5 himself. There are some great programs out there, but there are also ones like these, and I don't think shrugging and saying that the teens are exaggerating is the way to go. We should support the good programs and shutdown ones like these.

- Kel

Posted 06/23/09 12:05 PM

Treating troubled kids with violence creates a new set of circumstances - violence begets violence. Victims often become perpetrators...or turn inward with depressive, anxiety symptoms, or even post traumatic stress. Abuse does not treat, heal or cure. This abusive group should be reported to a child protective agency. Drug and alcohol related problems are not easy challenges for either parents or youth to cope with. But, throwing your teen to the dogs is not a solution. MerrieWay suggests for both parents and youth to read 'Peace Smarts' curriculum- how to create a peace culture. It can be found on www.hollywoodmag.org
- MerrieWay

Posted 06/25/09 04:26 AM

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