



## Questions abound behind the razor wire of Restoration Youth Academy, a Prichard boot camp

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By



John Young and William Knott, who run Restoration Youth Academy, are shown here as they give a reporter a tour. (Press-Register/Victor Calhoun)

PRICHARD, Alabama -- Tucked away among the narrow streets of Alabama Village, one of Prichard's toughest slums, sits a compound of buildings surrounded by fences and razor wire.

The security isn't just meant to keep people out. It's meant to keep people in.

Officials at **Restoration Youth Academy**, a boot-camp-style facility for troubled youth, say they have to ensure maximum security to block runaway attempts.

By design, the staff tightly restricts the lives of the more than 60 young people there, controlling when they eat, sleep and exercise. The staff decides when and where they can have contact with the outside world.

Despite the immense power that RYA wields over those under its care, it is not required to carry any license. Due to Alabama's deference to facilities that operate under a church banner, it functions largely free from government oversight or accountability.

RYA has been the subject of parental complaints. Its counselor is not certified by Alabama's main governing boards. Its teachers also have no state certification, and may not need it, thanks to RYA's claim to be a church school.

Although the property on which it sits is owned by the city of Prichard, RYA has never paid a dollar in rent or purchased a business license.

Police records show that, since RYA opened in 2010, officers have visited there at least seven times to investigate reports of runaways, stolen vehicles, "missing or exploited children" and one complaint of second-degree sexual abuse.

Police have not made any arrests in connection with those reports, so it's hard to know the final results of their investigations.

Alabama legal tradition requires law enforcement to release only the front page of an incident report. The front pages offer no investigative details, only the nature of the reported crime.

Police declined to release the full reports involving RYA or to discuss the cases, because they involve minors.


John Young, a pastor and the face of RYA, said that there is no mistreatment of young people by the staff members.

William Knott, who lives at RYA and handles many of its day-to-day affairs, said that complaints of abuse are inevitable when dealing with troubled youth. "They are going to say anything they can to get away from here," he said.

Knott showed the Press-Register two letters from the Alabama Department of Human Resources, a state agency that examines child abuse reports, indicating that RYA had been investigated but cleared.

A spokesman for the department said that all such investigations are confidential, so he could not even confirm whether they had taken place.

## "She told me I'm not her mother anymore"

 Lydia Honea.jpeg

RYA got mixed reviews from parents interviewed by the Press-Register.

Some said it was a Godsend, reasonably priced and the only facility that was able to help them. But Beyth Honea, who lives in the Chicago area, told a harrowing tale of her experiences.

Honea said that she brought her daughter, Lydia, to RYA in June 2011 because of severe behavioral problems, including pathological lying and theft.

As time went on, she said, she began to have problems reaching staff members and communicating with her daughter. Honea said she became suspicious that RYA was not the highly structured, professional operation that it claimed to be.

### **View full size**

Lydia Honea, now 18, said she came to RYA as a liar and a thief, but the boot camp helped her. When she turned 18, RYA officials gave her a job as

an instructor. (Press-Register/Victor Calhoun)

She started looking into the organization and found out that it had no license, although officials there had told her otherwise, she said. She also was surprised that none of the state agencies that one might presume to govern such an institution had any record of it.

Ultimately, she decided to remove her daughter from the boot camp.

In February, as she drove through the winding streets of east Prichard, she had one objective, she said: Get her daughter back as soon as possible.

When she arrived, Honea said, the staff didn't know where her daughter was. When Honea came back with a police officer, Knott told her that Lydia was in Florida with a staff member.

Later, when Honea and the officer returned, a group of men escorted the young woman to the chain link fence line at the gate, according to the mother. Through the fence, her daughter, who had turned 18 only hours earlier, said she was an adult now and didn't have to leave if she didn't want to. She said that RYA had offered her a job as an instructor and that she had accepted.

"She told me I wasn't her mother anymore, that these people were her family now," Beyth Honea said.

A police report, filed by the officer who accompanied Honea and obtained by the Press-Register, largely mirrors her account.

In an interview this month, Lydia Honea and the RYA staff said that she indeed was in Florida with a staff member when her mother showed up.

Lydia Honea admitted to having behavioral issues when she arrived at RYA, but she said that Young and Knott were helping her to improve. She said they made numerous efforts to communicate with her mother, including sending regular updates and report cards.

Lydia's father, Eric Honea, reached by telephone, said that he not only gave RYA permission to take his daughter off site, he specifically asked them to do so until after she turned 18. He said that he did not want his ex-wife to be able to remove Lydia from RYA, which he believed had helped her immensely.

"I figured, by then, she's 18, she can make that determination for herself," he said.

Honea acknowledged that his former wife had sole custody of their daughter, so the decision was not entirely his to make.

He said, however, that RYA was unaware of the custody arrangement, and he had signed all of the paperwork and paid the bills associated with the program.

He said, "My daughter could not get any help from all the Ph.Ds and mental-health specialists we could find. These people truly care about Lydia, and she's doing much better. That means more to me than all the degrees hanging on the wall in the world."

He questioned why, if Beyth Honea were so skeptical of RYA, she would allow RYA to keep Lydia for some nine months.

Beyth Honea said that it took time for her to look into the institution, which she acknowledged she did not fully vet beforehand.

Like Eric Honea, parent Jennifer Manly of Colorado Springs praised RYA for its work. She said that her son returned from the facility much more respectful of authority.

She said that she recognized the academic program might seem a bit unorthodox, but her primary concern was dealing with her son's behavioral troubles. "This is a ministry, and I knew that going in. I was looking for a Christian-based program," Manly said.

### **RYA has no license, neither does counselor**

Up until recently, RYA's website claimed that the organization was a "licensed residential facility," but that statement has since been removed.

The Press-Register contacted the state departments of Human Resources, Education and Youth Services, none of which reported any record of RYA.

Various other RYA representations remained on its website as of Saturday. For example, it assures that each child will "receive weekly counseling with a licensed certified counselor on a regular basis or more frequently as determined necessary."

Knott and Young said that RYA's counselor, Aleshia Moffett, is licensed both by Alabama and Mississippi. They showed the Press-Register a license from Mississippi, but were unable to produce one from Alabama.

Four Alabama agencies who license counselors of at-risk youth -- the Board of Examiners in Counseling, Board of Examiners in Psychology, the Marriage Family Therapy Board and the Social Work Board -- had no record of an Aleshia Moffett.

The National Board for Certified Counselors, which issues credentials for counselors, had no record of her either.

Told this information, Knott said that Moffett "doesn't even have to be licensed in Alabama to do what she does."

Asked to be more precise about what Moffett does, Knott said that she counsels troubled youth with problems such as behavioral disorders and substance abuse, and works to help them re-establish relationships with their parents. "She's done this very successfully," he said.

Walter Cox, director of the Alabama Board of Examiners in Counseling, said that state law generally requires anyone practicing counseling to hold a license.

The law does provide an exemption for churches operating counseling services. Cox called this "a flaw in the law" because it invites abuse.

"There is a little bit of a slippery area there where someone might be able to work around the law," he said.

One of the critical questions the board asks in deciding if a counseling service falls under the church exemption is whether it accepts payment for its services, Cox said.

Regardless, he said, it is illegal under state law to misrepresent to the public that you have a license.


RYA's website also assures that its "education department is headed by a well qualified staff with numerous awards and achievements." Knott and Young acknowledged that neither of RYA's two teachers were certified by the state.

Alabama law requires certification for teachers at public schools and at private schools that wish to receive the state's seal of approval, but that doesn't apply to church schools. A church school is defined as one that is "operated as a ministry of a local church, group of churches, denomination, and/or association of churches on a nonprofit basis," according to Malissa Valdes-Hubert, a Department of Education spokeswoman.

The Press-Register asked Young and Knott whether RYA was a nonprofit. Young and Knott said that it is, although it is registered under Solid Rock Community Outreach Inc., a spin-off of Young's church, Solid Rock Ministries.

According to records available online, the Internal Revenue Service granted nonprofit status to Solid Rock in 2004 but revoked its tax-free exemption after it failed to file the proper tax returns for three consecutive years.

## **Cohort of students flee only to be caught in Florida**

 Restoration Youth Academy, Exterior.jpeg

**View full size**

Tucked away among the narrow streets of Alabama Village, one of Prichard's toughest slums, sits RYA, a compound of buildings surrounded by fences and razor wire. The security isn't just meant to keep people out. It's meant to keep people in. (Press-Register/John David Mercer)

A California parent, Tony Eigenmann, said he is convinced that the RYA operation is misrepresenting its qualifications in order to justify the charges it levies. He said that his son was treated roughly there, and received no useful education.

His son stayed only a month, and RYA charged him almost \$5,000, Eigenmann said.

Young and Knott said that Eigenmann's son is not credible, describing him as someone who would say anything to escape the strictures of the RYA program.

Young and Knott introduced to the Press-Register a 16-year-old who said that Eigenmann's son was part of a group that tried to escape and agreed to lie to police and parents in order to damage RYA's reputation and "get out of here." The teen further said that the group eventually managed to escape, stole a van and made it to Florida, but was caught.

The teen said that others in the group confessed to making false claims of abuse, but that young Eigenmann stuck to his story and was pulled out by his father.

Young said he and the RYA "end up paying out of our own pockets" to support the youths, and that the organization "barely breaks even."

He estimated that it costs RYA about \$850 per month to care for each young person there. That includes food and clothes for the youths, facility maintenance and staff salaries, he said.

Young's tally of the overhead costs left out rent. RYA has never paid Prichard to rent the land, nor does it have a lease that would give it a legal right to remain there.

How Prichard, a city beset by financial difficulty, could allow RYA to occupy its property rent-free remains something of a mystery.

According to Mayor Ron Davis and City Council members, the council agreed in principle in 2010 to allow RYA to rent the property, subject to an appraiser setting fair market value.

In the interim, Young was given keys to buildings on the property so that he could begin getting the utilities in order and setting up his operation.

The appraisal, however, didn't happen. A lease was never drawn or executed.

Davis said that the City Council is in charge of city property, so it was responsible for making sure the lease was taken care of.

Councilman Troy Ephriam, who has announced that he will run for mayor against Davis, maintained that Davis was fully aware that RYA was operating on the property without paying rent. "He has attorneys that could have taken over the process at any point," Ephriam said. "It shows irresponsibility on his part that nothing was done."

Young said in an interview that he should have insisted on finalizing the lease deal. "I wasn't trying to get over on anybody," he said. "Should I probably have pushed harder to get it done? Yes."

While Young said that RYA struggles financially, a Prichard police report filed last year suggests that he has personally had access to luxury goods. In June, he reported that burglars broke into his house and stole property that he estimated to have cost about \$96,000, including Armani suits, crocodile-skin shoes, jewelry and flat-screen televisions.

Asked how he could afford such possessions if RYA were barely staying afloat, Young said that the stolen items had been gifts from members of his church.

On "love days," a tradition in many black churches, it is common for the congregation to make special offerings or bring gifts for the pastor to show appreciation.

## **RYA operates off the radar because of special rules for churches**

Many of the questions about RYA have likely gone unnoticed because it has operated off the radar of government regulators.

Under Alabama law, child-care facilities must be licensed by the Department of Human Resources unless they are operated by a church.

Barry Spear, a spokesman for the department, said RYA wouldn't need a DHR license because it doesn't fit the definition of a child-care facility. Instead, he said, RYA might be considered "bona fide boarding school," and would not be subject to DHR licensing.

Spear said it was up to the Department of Education to decide whether RYA qualified as a "bona fide boarding school or not."

The department's Valdes-Hubert said that her agency doesn't issue licenses, per se, and it has no power over a school like RYA. She said that private schools are supposed to at least register, but church schools are exempt from that requirement.

A judge or perhaps the attorney general would have to decide whether RYA qualifies as a church school, Valdes-Hubert said. She reiterated though, that under the law, church schools must be nonprofits.

Even if RYA qualifies as a church school, there should still be at least some record of it with the local school superintendent's office, which is in charge of enforcing mandatory student attendance laws. Nancy Pierce, a spokeswoman for the Mobile County public schools, said that the system had no record of RYA.

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