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Teen dies after restraint at Arizona Boys Ranch

By Dennis Wagner

A 16-year-old inmate who died after a fight with employees at the Arizona Boys Ranch in Oracle had been sick for weeks with a lung ailment, according to a medical examiner's report.

Coroners found that Nicholas Contreras' death March 2 was caused by complications from an "empyema," or collection of pus between the lung and the lining of the left chest.

A news release from the Pima County Medical Examiner says the autopsy revealed 2 1/2 quarts of pus in the cavity. Much of the lung had collapsed due to space taken up by the fluid, the report says, and infection apparently had been present "at least for weeks prior to death."

In addition, the boy's right lung revealed mild pneumonia, as well as evidence of chronic bronchitis.

"All of these conditions combined to reduce the body's ability to take oxygen," continued the news release. "Additional stress was placed on the body through physical activity which Nicholas was required to perform."

Boys Ranch officials have told Child Protective Services that Contreras died after grappling with staffers and being placed in a restraint hold. The youth had been uncooperative, refusing to work or eat, and collapsed after being ordered to do calisthenics, the officials said.

Boys Ranch officials, including president Robert Thomas, could not be reached for comment. However, they issued a written statement Friday, saying they hoped the coroner's report would put an end to "inaccurate information . . . innuendo and rumors" presented by the media.

"The autopsy reported that Nicholas was 'well-developed and well-nourished,' " says the statement. "We hope that when the family receives the facts, they will be relieved that Boys Ranch staff did their best to revive Nicholas."

The autopsy report also states that "multiple scrapes and bruises were on the body."

"There was no evidence that any of these injuries caused his death, although some were likely the result of his required physical activities," it said.

Medical examiners ruled the boy's lung condition "probably led to a strain on the heart and the development of an irregular rhythm and cardiac arrest."

Keith St. John, a Pima County medical investigator, said the infection suffered by Contreras typically develops from pneumonia, but may also spread through the bloodstream from another site.

He declined to comment on what symptoms Contreras would have exhibited, or whether his malady should have been easily diagnoseable.

An investigation of the death by Pinal County Sheriff's Office remains open, according to spokesman Mike Minter.

Department of Economic Security officials, who license the Boys Ranch and also are investigating, were unavailable.

The non-profit Boys Ranch corporation operates eight campuses in Arizona, and is considered a "last-chance" rehabilitation home for about 550 juvenile delinquents.

Ranch officials have said Contreras received a medical check shortly before his death. They later conducted an internal probe which cleared employees of wrongdoing.

This is the second death at Boys Ranch in four years. In 1994, a 17-year-old boy drowned during what ranch officials said was an escape attempt. Pima County officials ruled the drowning accidental.

Boys Ranch is suing The Arizona Republic over an article about that incident. It also sued DES after investigators alleged 13 incidents of abuse in 1993 and 1994, and placed the facility on probation. Ranch officials contend only one abuse claim was valid, and DES inspectors were biased and incompetent in their probe.

After Contreras' death, the Maricopa County Juvenile Court issued orders to stop the sentencing of additional Arizona boys to the ranch pending a sheriff's report.

Return to [Newsroom Index](#) or to [Table of Contents](#).