

Exclusive videos detail tactics at teen boot camps in Pasadena

By Brian Charles, Staff Writer

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Video: Watch: videos offer inside look at children's boot camps

Photo gallery: Inside look at controversial children's boot camps

PASADENA - Two disturbing videos obtained by this newspaper offer an inside look at Pasadena-based boot camps.

The videos were created at least two years ago. One shows Kelvin "Sgt. Mac" McFarland forcing children to gorge themselves on water. The children in the video struggle to drink the water and several are seen vomiting as a result.

The second video shows a boy crying as he carries a truck tire around his neck. McFarland and three other boot camp instructors - at least one of whom was allegedly on active duty in the U.S. Marine Corps at the time - can be seen screaming at the boy and coaxing him to say he "loves his sergeant."

The boy falls to his knees in tears and for a time it appears that he too is going to vomit.

Child abuse legal expert and USC Gould School of Law Professor Thomas Lyons did not view the videos but said the behavior described on them could easily fit the broad definition of child abuse.

"A lot of statutes will include cruelty as part of the definition of child abuse," Lyons said. "If there is no justification for this and

you are just trying to induce pain, that could be child abuse."

Lyons also raised questions about the efficacy of the methods used in the videos.

"He can argue that this is all part of the program and part of necessary discipline," Lyon said. "But there are plenty of experts that will tell you that the behavior is beyond the pale and not effective."

McFarland, a Monrovia resident, is the operator of Family First Growth Camp in Pasadena. He denied he was in either video, although he declined the opportunity to view them. When asked about his role in the videos, McFarland acknowledged they existed. However, he said "if you look at that video, you will see Keith 'Sarge' Gibbs in the video."

Gibbs operates Sarge's Community Base, Inc. /Commit II Achieve Boot Camp, also based in Pasadena.

While Gibbs is not seen in either video, his voice is heard off camera in one of the recordings. Children in both videos are seen wearing Commit II T-shirts.

Gibbs denied being present during the filming of



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the videos. He offered no explanation for why his voice was heard on one.

He said he deplored the instructors' behavior in the videos.

"It's not the way I would run a camp," Gibbs said.

Before they were rival boot camp operators, McFarland worked for Sarge's Community Base, Inc./Commit II Achieve Boot Camp, which Gibbs owns and operates.

Both men have served in the military, with McFarland serving in the Persian Gulf War.

McFarland said he is a recovering alcoholic who at one time was homeless. He said he was turning his own life around at the same time that he was trying to reform troubled children.

The two boot camp instructors parted ways in 2009, when McFarland failed to pass a background check and allegations emerged of inappropriate training methods, Gibbs said.

McFarland launched Family First Growth Camp in Pasadena in 2009. Gibbs said at that time McFarland began recruiting children and instructors away from Gibbs' operation.

McFarland was arrested on May 27 and charged with kidnapping, child abuse, false imprisonment, extortion and unlawful use of a badge. The charges stem from a May 16 incident during which McFarland allegedly handcuffed a truant Pasadena Unified School District high school student and extorted money from her family.

According to testimony given in a pre-trial hearing, McFarland told the victim's family that he would take the girl to a juvenile detention center unless the family enrolled her in his Family First Growth Camp.

The girl was never enrolled in the boot camp,

according to court testimony.

Pasadena police have not broadened their investigation into Pasadena boot camps or their operators to include allegations outside of the May 16 incident, according to Lt. Tracey Ibarra.

Gibbs' boot camp operation has not been free of controversy.

He was kicked off Pasadena Unified School District campuses in 2009, after allegations emerged that McFarland was "too rough" on the children in his program and forced several children to clean the bathrooms in the school.

Boot camps operate with little in the way of oversight, according to a 2007 Government Accountability Office report.

Boot camp staff members are often untrained, discipline hawks and many of the trainers are convinced the children under their command are faking injuries, the report said.

Children are pushed past their physical breaking points day-after-day; injuries occur, go untreated and the children often die slowly, the report said.

According to the GAO report, more than 1,600



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teens have been victims of abuse in juvenile boot camp programs since 1990, and 10 have died.

In its report, the GAO admitted that the lack of oversight "hampered" efforts to count child abuse incidents at juvenile boot camps.

Rep. George Miller, D-Richmond, subsequently sponsored two bills to regulate boot camps. Both passed the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008 and 2009, respectively, but failed in the U.S. Senate.

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