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## Former Hephzibah House Students Demonstrate, Advocate For Change

**Tim Robertson**  
Staff Writer

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Eight women sat in the lobby of a local hotel Friday morning, swapping stories of common experiences they say occurred when they were students at Hephzibah House, a Warsaw boarding school for girls.

The women come from several different states, and the stories they tell are stories of physical, emotional and mental abuse.

"They'd lay us on the floor with one staff woman on our legs and one at our head to hold us down," said Katrina Little, Ohio, who was a student at Hephzibah House from March 1983 to July 1984. Little was describing spankings that others also have described as one of the physical forms of punishment at the school.

"I was terrified all the time, because you could get paddled for anything," said Renee Showers, Michigan, a Hephzibah House student for nine months between 1981 and 1982.

Showers said she was paddled several times per week for the first three or four months of her stay at the school, and she said she wasn't the only one punished that way.

"It was horrible hearing other girls down there screaming," she said, "and they come up crying and you couldn't even give them a hug or anything."

Hephzibah House officials did not return a phone call for comment Friday morning, but, in June released a statement that they would not grant any interviews. In the release, Hephzibah staff wrote, "Because of the nature of our work, which includes working with minors and the resulting needs for privacy of the girls and their parents, tours of the facility, interviews with staff members or students and other normal needs of the news media cannot be honored."

However, the school did provide letters from supporters, all denying that physical, emotional or mental abuse took place at the school.

Friday, in the hotel lobby, the women said they enjoyed the opportunity to talk together and affirm each other, but that wasn't the only reason they came to Warsaw Friday; they also came to demonstrate. The women stood in front of the Kosciusko Courthouse from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. holding signs and handing out flyers to boost community awareness of the abuse they say they survived at Hephzibah House. It was the third time in five months that former students from the school have demonstrated there. Some, like Gabriella Fleury, Michigan, and Susan Grotte, Minnesota, have attended the other demonstrations. For five of the former students, Friday's demonstration was the first time they've taken a stand against the alleged abuse.

"With all of us coming together, it has helped a lot," said Little. "Instead of keeping the experience and emotion in our heads, we can get it out."

The demonstrators were joined by several other supporters, including two former students of a similar institution headquartered in Indianapolis and members of a new local task force formed to pursue a change in state law that would allow private residential facilities for children to be monitored by the state.

Hephzibah House is a private, not-for-profit organization connected to Believers Baptist Church, Winona Lake. That means the school isn't under any government oversight with regard to activities that take place on the campus.

"They file a business entity report with the state; why can't they be regulated by the state?" said former student Connie Wagner, Lafayette. "I understand it's a religious base, but they still have an incorporation with the secretary of state."

"Even a prisoner has an advocate," said Grotte, "just someone the kid can tell if there's something bad going on."

Jo Faulkner, Warsaw, is a member of the local task force. Faulkner said she got involved because she sees the women's accusations as a community issue.

"When I read this stuff and heard some of the stories, I thought, 'What a black eye for our community,'" Faulkner said. "Obviously, something has to be done. We're not anti-any church, we're anti-abuse. We want to make sure the abuse stops."

Becky Moreno, victim assistance advocate at the Warsaw Police Department, headed up the formation of the task force. Moreno said Thursday she had the opportunity to talk with some of the former Hephzibah House students and hear their stories. She said what impressed her most when listening to the women was that they weren't calling for personal vengeance on those they claimed abused them, but were more concerned with protecting others.

"Their attitudes are amazing," Moreno said. "They truly just want to make sure children in Indiana are protected. That's why it is so easy to support them."

Former Hephzibah House student Danna Fisher, Fort Wayne, said she is starting a Fort Wayne chapter of the task force and recently launched a Web site, [www.freewebs.com/voicesofthepast](http://www.freewebs.com/voicesofthepast)

Rachel Greene, Chicago, a Grace College student, said she plans to join the task force as well. Greene and several of her classmates joined Friday's demonstration.

"Something at our school we've been talking about is awareness and the effect it can have," said Sarah Barkan, Ohio.

For more information about Hephzibah House, call the school's office at 574-269-2376 or 574-269-2375.

For more information about former students' accusations against the school, visit online at [www.formerhephzibahgirls.webs.org](http://www.formerhephzibahgirls.webs.org) or [www.hephzibahhouse.com](http://www.hephzibahhouse.com) or [www.hephzibah-girls.blogspot.com](http://www.hephzibah-girls.blogspot.com)

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