

Camp Counselors Charged in Teen's Death

Earthlink.net, July 19, 2005

CLEVELAND, Ga. - Six counselors at a state-run wilderness camp for troubled boys were charged with murder in the death of a 13-year-old boy with asthma who was restrained for more than an hour.

A White County grand jury handed up the charges of felony murder, child cruelty and involuntary manslaughter Monday.

"This is all based on the criminal negligence or reckless conduct of these individuals," said White County District Attorney Stan Gunter. "It was due to the restraint, and how they applied it, that has led to these charges."

Travis Parker died April 21, a day after he was held face down by counselors at the Appalachian Wilderness Camp in Cleveland, in the North Georgia mountains. The boy had angrily confronted one of the counselors for withholding food from him as punishment.

Parker had asthma and was denied his inhaler during the restraint. A medical examiner ruled the death a homicide.

An attorney for counselor Mathew Desing said the counselors restrained the boy as they had been taught.

"They were doing what they were trained to do," attorney Abbi Taylor Guest said. "This is clearly not a case of counselors gone awry." Desing "cared very much for the children he worked with, and he cared very much for the job of helping those children," she said.

But Gwen Skinner, an official at the Georgia Department of Human Resources, which oversees the camp, said the counselors were not following agency rules or procedures.

"We do not train staff to do face-down restraints," she said.

The other five counselors who were indicted were Ryan Chapman, Paul Binford, Torbin Vining, Johnny Harris and Phillip Elliott.

All six had resigned or been fired after the boy's death. They were expected to turn themselves in to the White County Sheriff's Office on Tuesday, Guest said.

Travis had been ordered to the camp in February. He was on probation after hitting his grandmother, who adopted him, and threatening her with a knife.

His family's attorney, Thomas Cuffie, said the grandmother, Golden Griffin, "would like to see the individuals involved prosecuted because she thinks the evidence that she's seen so far warrants that type of treatment."

Since his death, the state has retrained staff on the use of restraints and is reviewing its policies on when restraints may be used, officials said.

Authorities had said that counselors did not give him the inhaler because an emergency medical technician saw no indications such as wheezing that he was having an asthma attack and because the boy had a history of asking for his inhaler when he was being restrained.

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