



Biblical Reform School Discipline: Tough Love or Abuse?

Missouri Baptist Reform Schools Accused by Mothers of Harsh Punishment and Deprivation

By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES

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Priscilla's rebellion against her large Christian family -- she was one of 10 children -- began after she was gang-raped last year while jogging in her Maryland neighborhood.

"Because of that the trauma, she started spiraling in every way possible," said her mother, Jeannie Marie, who did not want their last name made public.

Priscilla, now 18, said she numbed the pain with drinking and rebellion, which terrified her mother.

Desperate, Jeannie Marie turned to her church for help, learning about a Christian reform school that she says promised to "get right" her wayward daughter.

But neither was prepared for the ordeal they say Priscilla experienced from November to January of this year at [New Beginnings Girls Academy](#), an Independent Fundamental Baptist boarding school in La Russell, Mo.

The school, according to its [website](#), serves troubled teens so "through Jesus Christ, they can overcome their addictions, mend their broken relationships and get their lives on the right path."

Instead, Priscilla said she was told the rape was her fault and was subjected to harsh discipline -- ridiculed, restrained and deprived of proper nutrition and adequate clothing.

As punishment for misbehaving she says she was forced to wear a red shirt and stand facing a wall, sometimes for 8 to 10 hours a day with only 15-minute breaks for food. "I was so achy it hurt," said Priscilla.

She said toilet paper and sanitary pads were rationed, despite Priscilla's urinary problems after the rape. She also said no one offered to get her medical care.

"We thought maybe Priscilla would go there and hide out and pull herself together," said Jeannie Marie. "We thought it was a safe place to go and we wouldn't

have to worry...We trusted our church."

Priscilla left the school in January, but said the punitive approach left her with no self-worth and anxiety attacks so bad she cannot breathe.

New Beginnings charges \$10,300 a year, according to its admission application. On a signed form, parents agree to "corporal discipline," which is spelled out in their mission statement as up to 15 "swats" with a wooden paddle in each 24-hour period for misbehavior.

The school's mission also prohibits, "bringing civil lawsuits against other Christians or the church to resolve personal disputes."

Submission and obedience -- children to parents, wives to husbands and parishioners to "God's people," pastors and deacons -- are the tenets of Christian fundamentalism, according to Kathryn Joyce, author of [Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement](#).

"These groups know what the outside world thinks of them and that some of it is considered abuse, but they consider it Biblical," said Joyce.

Missouri does not require its faith-based facilities to

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get a license and the [state attorney general](#), "does not have any authority over them," according to AG spokeswoman Nanci Gonder. If there are allegations of physical abuse, parents are told to contact law enforcement.

Similarly, neither the [Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) nor the state board of education regulates or monitors faith-based schools under the [home schooling law](#).

The [Department of Social Services](#) said the schools were not within their purview and only allegations of abuse and neglect that "meet statutory definition," are investigated.

The federal government, however, has shown concern about teen residential programs -- not all of them faith based -- and has pushed for more regulation.

In 2008, an [investigation by the federal Government Accountability Office](#) revealed thousands of cases and allegations of child abuse and neglect since the early 1990s at teen residential programs throughout the country. The report also found major gaps in licensing and oversight.

The report found untrained staff, ineffective management and operating practices in these facilities.

"In the most egregious cases of [death and abuse](#), the cases exposed problems with the entire operation of the program," according to the report.

Congressman George Miller, D-California, introduced the [Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act of 2009](#) to establish minimum health and safety standards, but although the bill twice passed the House, both times it failed in the Senate.

"You can't deprive kids of food and water," one Democratic aide to Miller told ABCNews.com. "You have to treat them humanely."

Just last year in Hiland Park, Fla., [police removed 17 children from Heritage Boys Academy](#), a military school that taught fundamental Christian doctrine, arresting three, including the pastor, and shut down the facility.

Child welfare authorities said the children were often hit with sticks that were "nine fists long," and were sometimes choked or held down and beaten with fists.

The school officials plead not guilty to one charge of aggravated assault and five charges of child abuse, but the case has not yet gone to trial. A motion by the

defense to dismiss is being heard on Friday, according to the clerk for the [Bay County Courts](#).

Well-Dressed Girls Testified They Were 'Saved'

Priscilla's mother said she first heard a New Beginnings presentation at the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Churchville, Md. There, according to Jeannie Marie, neatly dressed girls confessed to bad behaviors and cried that they had been "saved."

"They told us it was a place that helps girls grow in their Christianity in a new life with Christ," she said.

She handed Priscilla over to school authorities while New Beginnings was on a fundraising tour in Virginia. "It really took me by surprise," said Priscilla, who thought she was going on vacation. "I freaked out and balled my eyes out."

The first night Priscilla said she slept on a church pew and was punished for cussing when she fell off and hit her head on a hymnal.

But when the group returned to their Missouri campus, Priscilla said the house was frigidly cold and girls were given only skirts and light sweatshirts.

The food -- often bologna on white bread, watered-down milk and canned eggs -- was either rationed or loaded on the plate, depending on the whim of the staff, she said.

Girls were told to keep monotone voices and never to talk to each other. Phone calls and letters were monitored, she said.

"They said I am bad and God doesn't love me," said Priscilla. "I was taught the exact opposite of that in



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the home. It was hard to believe that these people actually cared about me. You had to fend for yourself."

Two months later, after a dispute with school officials about the costs, Jeannie Marie said she withdrew Priscilla. When she arrived at New Beginnings, she said she was horrified by what she saw.

"She looked like the most pitiful thing standing in the little snow boots I bought her -- mud-covered with a thin skirt covering her knees with dirt on it...Her face was as ghostly white, her eyes bugged out and hair was pulled back. My tiny girl had a horrible look on her face...the most awful expression I have ever seen on the face of my children. I gasped and held my breath."

Jeannie Marie said that when she held her daughter, "she was so weak and faint...and her body went limp. There was nothing left to her."

She said her former pastor at Tabernacle Baptist, Don Martin, had recommended the school as successful, but it was not as advertised.

Martin said that a previous pastor had financially supported the school in the past, but he never made such claims to Priscilla's mother.

"If someone in our congregation did, that's another thing," he said.

"As far as I know, they come highly recommended," Martin said of the school. "I know they have to be strict -- or it doesn't do much good to send wayward ladies to a school. But I don't know how strict or what they do."

He said allegations of physical punishment in these IFB reform schools were "pretty much nonsense" and the family's claims were "fabrications."

"My sense is people send children there and they want them to come back as model citizens, and if something goes wrong, they want to blame the school. I think they tried to help, but that doesn't mean a thing if there is not good support."

William McNamara, New Beginnings' director, refused to answer questions about the program and allegations that it was abusive.

"We love them," he said of the students. "I cannot speak to any of those things -- the truth will be known."

He referred ABCNews.com to his lawyer, Wes Barnum, who did not respond to written questions sent by email or a follow-up telephone call.

New Beginnings began as the Rebekah Home for Girls in Corpus Christie, Texas, in 1968, but was shut down by the state in 1985 after numerous investigations of abuse and its refusal to submit to state licensing.

Under changing names, the school moved temporarily to Devil's Elbow, Mo., before relocating in Pace, Fla., and eventually to its present home in La Russell, Mo.

The school was run by Lester Roloff, an independent fundamental Baptist preacher who broke from the Southern Baptist Convention in 1954 and founded a series of reform facilities, known as [Roloff Homes](#), for what he called, "parent-hating, Satan-worshiping, dope-taking immoral boys and girls," according to a [2000 investigative report in Texas Monthly](#).

His antidote to these rebellious teens was anchored in scripture and included kneeling on hard floors, physical punishment with paddles or leather straps or the "dreaded 'look-up,' an isolation room where Roloff's sermons were played for days on end," said the magazine.

Roloff died in a plane crash in 1982, but his ministry still exists in adult programs as part of the People's Baptist Church in Texas and other adult facilities around the country.

"We do not tolerate child abuse of any form," said August Rosado, a spokesman for Roloff Homes.

He said the Texas church was no longer affiliated with New Beginnings and now serves only adults who are struggling with addiction.

Some Former Students Report Post-Traumatic Stress



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Brittany Campbell, now 25, says she was at Rebekah through its transition to New Beginnings from 2001 to 2005. The school moved to Missouri in 2007.

She showed ABCNews.com photos of the name changes from Rebekah Home for Girls to New Beginnings Rebekah Academy to New Beginnings Girls Academy.

Campbell said McNamara was in charge during that period. When ABCNews.com called him to ask about charges of abuse at the school, he would only say, "I cannot speak to any of those things -- the truth will be known."

Campbell had grown up in foster care, but went to live with her sister, who was a recent IFB convert.

At 15, after rebelling against the Christian household -- listening to secular music and wearing black -- she said she was sent to reform school.

"It was brutally psychologically and physically abusive," she said of both the Missouri and Florida programs.

"The worst part personally was during the first year through the process of breaking you down and getting you to submit to their way of life," she said.

Campbell said the staff pitted girls against girls, often having them pinned down by their peers for discipline -- "a tool to discourage camaraderie."

Cut off from family and friends for so long, Campbell said she had a hard transition back to the real world.

Today, Campbell lives in Massachusetts and is administrator of a Facebook group, [NBGA: Proactive Survivors of New Beginnings Girls Academy](#), which has 65 members and writes a [blog](#).

She is also the administrator of [SIA-NOW](#), an organization that is planning a convention of participants of these boarding schools next year. Campbell said many of them reported post-traumatic stress disorder after their school experiences.

It was websites like those that Donna Maddox said caught her attention three months after she sent her 15-year-old daughter Kelsey to [Circle of Hope Ranch](#) in Humansville, Mo., in 2007, then returned to "rescue" her.

Maddox, 42, said she was hesitant to believe Kelsey's claims of abuse at the school, but saw testimonies from former students that scared her.

"We were told everything we wanted to hear, but

nothing was as it was portrayed."

She provided ABCNews.com with photos of dirty facilities, beds made only of plywood with a thin foam cover and bruises on her daughter's feet from working the ranch in shoes so old the soles were tearing away.

She said the school charged \$300 in uniform fees.

Desperate Parents Look to Church For Help

Previously, Kelsey had been a good student, but was sent away because she began "getting involved in the wrong crowd," according to Maddox.

"I was really scared because my family has a history of abusing drugs and alcohol," she said. "I had seen so many horrendous things and how it tears up a family and I didn't want it to happen to one of my children."

Maddox found the school on the Internet and said a referral agency backed up their claims.

But Kelsey, now 18, said that from day one, she "felt like a slave."

"Every day I would wake up at 4 or 5 and start working the farm feeding animals, picking up the hay in barbed wire and walking five miles so you can make more money. I never did any school work."

Once, she said she was forced to do hundreds of push-ups and failed. As punishment, she said eight girls were told to jump on her and restrain her, smashing her face into the carpet.

After she returned home with her school books, Maddox said only 18 pages had been completed in



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three months.

"It is unimaginable in America," she said.

The director, Boyd C. Householder, said his lawyer advised him not to talk to reporters by telephone.

"We've been alleged on like most faith-based places and investigations have had no findings to the allegations," he said. "We have nothing to hide. We are up front and open and you are welcome to come to the property."

His lawyer Jay M. Kirksey later responded by email, saying the Maddox family were "bias[ed] and lacking credibility."

"There are unfortunately, disgruntled parents who address the school, instead of their children, in the private sector just as exists in the public school system," Kirksey wrote.

Shortly after Kelsey returned home, she moved away, but her mother said she calls and emails daily.

"This has been a living nightmare," Maddox, who subsequently called the attorney general with her consumer complaints about deceptive marketing.

"We have been trying to mediate (her) complaints," said Gonder, from the Missouri Attorney General Office. "The school has been cooperating in providing information, but their information is different from hers. Our efforts are ongoing."

Troubled teens often don't speak up for themselves, said another activist, Michele Ulriksen Tresler, who wrote a book, [Reform at Victory Christian Academy](#)," chronicling her own experience at the IFB school.

"They are called liars because they are labeled rebellious teenagers," said Tresler. "We had drug addicts, prostitutes and alcoholics among regular girls who didn't belong there, dabbling in regular teen rebellion. There were girls with some major issues who should have been in a place that helped them and giving them tools to have social skills. But when they go to the cops, no one believes them."

Tresler died of a drug overdose on March 17, just weeks after this interview. According to her ex-husband, Robert Ulriksen, "VCA was a demon that haunted her for many years."

Victory, run by Roloff disciple Mike Palmer, was shut down by California authorities after a student death in 1991. Palmer went on to run schools in Mexico and Florida that were also shut down.

As for Priscilla, she said she is now seeing a counselor and said she, too, has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress.

"She is doing terrible," said her mother. "She has no self-worth. They had her say a hundred times that she was the daughter of the devil with the tongue of the devil -- crazy destructive talk at New Beginnings. Now, I think she actually believes it."

Jeannie Marie has stopped going to the church she said "deceived" her.

"I did not lose my faith," she said. "But I know that many of these little girls will be terribly challenged to remember who God is, after this experience."



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