Report describes alleged abuse
State investigators found 9 instances of abuse, neglect

By Keith Chu / The Bulletin

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The experiences of five former students at Mount Bachelor Academy formed the basis of the state’s allegations of abuse and neglect at the private school for troubled teens, a recently released investigative report revealed.

The report, by the Oregon Department of Human Services Office of Investigation and Training, provides the most detailed view yet of the state's rationale for ordering the Crook County school to close on Nov. 3.

During a seven-month investigation, state investigators found nine instances of abuse or neglect at MBA. The school, located 26 miles east of Prineville, initially said it would appeal the charges but filed a notice with the state last week that it intended to close.

Investigators noted that the program’s most controversial practices, therapeutic workshops called Life steps, were written 20 years ago by the school’s founders, including one staff member with a background in drama, history and French.

The methods were most similar, a state psychiatric expert said, to “group approaches such as Psychodrama and Synanon,” which were popular in the 1960s and 1970s.

A spokeswoman for Mount Bachelor Academy’s parent company, CRC Health Inc., said the company declined to comment on the state report.

The first abuse allegation came from a female student who was asked to dress up as a French maid and perform lap dances for male students and one staff member.

The incident, which was first reported by The Bulletin in April, was confirmed by two students and a staff member, the report said.

Several staff members also “did not deny having Child A dress up in a ‘French Maid’s’ outfit and dance provocatively in front of staff and peers,” as treatment for the girl’s history of sexual abuse, the report said. The report does not name the students but refers them as Child or Student, followed by a letter.

Executive Director Sharon Bitz confirmed to investigators that the French maid outfit was used, although she disputed that the workshop the girl went through was abusive.

“Because of its sexual nature, it’s controversial,” Bitz said, according to the report.

In April, Bitz told The Bulletin that students used their own clothes in this workshop and that lap dances did not occur.

‘Harsh feedback’
The second allegation involved another girl, who had experienced sexual abuse. During a therapeutic workshop, with other students and staff present, the girl was first given “harsh feedback from peers,” which included being called derogatory names.

She was also instructed to lie on a mattress and throw a tantrum, while a staff member asked her, “How did (Mommy's, Daddy's) abuse make you feel?” the report said.

The student was told to go through the Lifestep workshop again because she didn't get enough out of it. The girl said she was glad she did.

During another Lifestep, called “Promise,” the girl was required to read from a sheet hanging on the wall. The sheet, which was obtained by investigators, was covered in phrases, including slang phrases, where the speaker demands sexual intercourse and refers to herself as a prostitute.

According to the report: “Bitz said the staff did not write the phrases on the sheets. She said past students made the sheets.

Asked if having the students read the phrases from the sheets was part of The Promise Lifestep, Bitz said, ‘It’s a small part.’”

The goal, Bitz said in the report, was to help students come to terms with their past, to facilitate change. “I believe the intention was for the good,” she said.

Other incidents

Another student with diagnosed mental health issues, referred to as Student C, was left unsupervised for several hours while on a field trip in Europe. An independent child psychiatrist said leaving that child unsupervised constituted neglect, given his or her mental health diagnosis.

In another alleged instance of sexual abuse, a girl, Child D, was required to re-enact past abuse with a male student, the report said, citing multiple witnesses.

Furthermore, the report said, “Several staff and peers reported that Child D was also required to dress as a ‘damsel in distress’ (redacted activity) and engage in other humiliating behaviors. Child D said Child D had to wear a dress that made Child D’s (breasts) ‘pop out,’ even though Child D stated Child D is ‘big chested’ and has body issues.”

Bitz told investigators that she doesn’t believe the girl was required to re-enact past abuse. The damsel in distress, role, Bitz said, was designed to improve the girl's self-esteem.

“Bitz explained the role of ‘Damsel in Distress’ is not a sexualized role, but really about standing up for one’s self, and realizing, ‘I don’t need a man to do it for me,’” the report said.

Finally, another student, Child E, reported being cursed at and called derogatory names by staff members, an allegation supported by “many witnesses,” the report said.

According to the report, Bitz said that the school’s policies don’t allow swearing at children: “As a school ... we teach that staff will not curse at kids. We teach how to be appropriate with kids. It is not something this program endorses or considers acceptable.”

Investigators see a pattern emerge
Although the charges were based on five students, investigators wrote that their experiences were similar to that of many youths who passed through MBA.

"Because all MBA students must participate in the prescribed program, the experience of these five students is substantially consistent with that of other children who are or were enrolled at the school," the report said. "Consequently, in many ways these five youth are exemplars of the program’s treatment of its students as a whole."

DHS forwarded its investigative report to Sgt. James Savage of the Crook County Sheriff’s Office in “early November,” said Keely West of the DHS Communications Office.

Savage couldn’t be reached for comment Monday.

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