

Shackled teen 'was running for his life'

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PORT ST. LUCIE — When her son ran away the first time from Victory Forge Military Academy, she thought she understood why.

It was a strict place, there was discipline and rules, she thought. Maybe he wasn't used to it.



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school commander Alan Weierman. So police decided to contact the Department of Children and Families, he said.

As a result, both police and DCF are investigating whether the use of the shackles was child abuse.

Although police officials say they can't discuss the case because it is still open, the case has been forwarded to the state attorney's office for review, a spokesman said.

But when he fled again from the boot camp-style boarding school - this time in leg shackles - the woman says she knew something was wrong.

The 16-year-old Port St. Lucie boy said "he was running for his life," his mother, who declined to give her name or his, said Friday.

Academy staff found the boy and called the police. Port St. Lucie officers who responded saw the boy wearing the shackles.

Police questioned whether using the leg restraints was legal, said Victory Forge

DCF officials also declined to discuss their investigation.

But DCF did contact parents last week informing them of the accusation and telling them to remove their sons from the school.

By Monday afternoon, all 16 boys had left the academy.

Weierman says the shackles are not abuse. They're used only to restrain the boys and are removed as soon as the student agrees not to run away again. The head of the academy also says parents are told what they could expect if their son ever ran away - he would be placed in shackles, and an extra three months would be tacked on to the 12-month commitment they make when they enroll their teen.

But the mother of the Port St. Lucie boy says she never knew her son was being shackled. She learned about the restraints, she says, when her son was found in early April.

By that time, Weierman has said, the boy had been wearing shackles on and off for 10 days.

The teen's mother called the shackles "child abuse" during an interview Friday.

"To shackle a kid, hey, that's abuse," she said.

The woman said she sent her son to the academy because, as a single mother, she was looking for a way to discipline the boy after he had been showing her disrespect.

A friend of hers suggested Victory Forge and since the boy had expressed an interest in one day joining the military, she believed the academy would be a good experience, she said.

The teen's first day at the school was Feb. 26. He ran away about two weeks later.

At the time, she thought he wasn't used to the discipline. Then the boy called and told her he had been called names, including a racial slur.

The mother says the boy returned after she talked with the school. But during his return, she says, she began having regrets.

The woman says she was about to pull her son out of the school when police contacted her on April 6 asking whether she had seen the teen. He had run away again, police said.

When she discovered her son had been shackled, she began to regret making him go back to the academy.

"Right there and then, I felt so guilty putting him there," she said. "It really hurt."

She says the boy later told her that while at the school he had also been punched in the face and choked.

The woman said she and her son both gave statements to police about their allegations. She says she's now talking with attorneys to fight the contract requiring her to pay the academy the rest of the \$28,600 she agreed to pay for her son's enrollment.

On Friday, Weierman said the woman's claim that she didn't know about the shackles is a lie. He denies

that the teen was ever punched or choked. Had it happened, he would have called police, Weierman said.

"To my knowledge, that never took place," he said.

Weierman says the mother is making the allegations because she wants to back out of her contract with the school. "To me, it's rather suspicious and convenient," he said.

But the woman says she's concerned about what happened to her son. "As a parent, as a mother, I'm still angry," she said. "I'm upset."

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