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Mother Claims Son Was Abused At S. Fla. School

Director Says School Is 'Behavior Modification' Program

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FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. -- A South Florida mother is outraged, saying her son was abused at an elite school in Fort Lauderdale at the hands of his drill sergeant.

Marilyn Johnson-Smith said she is haunted by her decision to send her son, Donald Hutchinson, to a school she thought was a private institution, a place where he would learn and be safe from altercations with other students.

"I was looking for a school with a small setting to help him," Hutchinson said. "But it's not a private school. It's an abuse school with boot camp."

Johnson-Smith said her son, a fifth-grader, was abused at the hands of a drill sergeant at Fort Lauderdale's Elite Leadership Academy.

"My son told me they forced him to the ground -- he forced him to the ground -- which gave him this scar on his face," Johnson-Smith said.

Hutchinson said the drill sergeant assaulted him after an altercation over a canteen, tossing him to the ground and digging his knee into the child's back.

Is this a case of abuse or simply standard procedure? Elite's executive director, Veronica Ruiz-Ashwal, said the school makes no pretense of its purpose, billing itself as a "behavior modification" program for students who have had problems in other schools.

"Whenever a drill instructor takes a child down, it's simply because the child is a safety threat to themselves or to someone else," Ruiz-Ashwal said.

It is not just the physical aspects of the academy that Johnson-Smith said she wants investigated. She said she did not know that the academy took a tough-love approach with students. She is angry that her son did not wear a uniform but instead a green jumpsuit issued upon arrival.

Ruiz-Ashwal said all students wear the jumpsuit for the first two weeks of the program.

Johnson-Smith has hired an attorney. Her lawyer said his client had no idea that Elite was designed for troubled students and is demanding that the school and the drill sergeant be investigated.

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