

IN THE IOWA DISTRICT COURT FOR LEE (SOUTH) COUNTY

STATE OF IOWA, V. BENJAMIN G. TRANE,	PLAINTIFF, DEFENDANT.	NO. FECR009152 MOTION FOR CHANGE OF VENUE
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COMES NOW the State of Iowa, by and through Assistant Attorney General Denise A. Timmins, and states the following in support of its Motion for Change of Venue:

1. Defendant is charged with Sexual Abuse Third Degree, Sexual Exploitation by a Counselor, and Child Endangerment. The charges occurred while defendant was the owner and operator of Midwest Academy (hereinafter MWA).

2. MWA was a private institution located at 2416 340th Street, Keokuk, Iowa, Lee County. The defendant was the owner and operator of the facility.

3. MWA employed numerous individuals from the local community and had many ties to local organizations and public agencies. MWA also used local government and community groups as references for prospective families. *See Exhibit A.*

4. For example, in an article ran in the local Daily Gate on February 5, 2016, the paper stated “In the past 13 years, Trane estimates that MWA has contributed to the purchase of more than 60,000 meals from local restaurants, the use of more than 20,000 hotels rooms, provided more than 55,000 community service hours, and spent more than \$50 million in goods, services and employee payroll. Midwest also has awarded more than \$750,000 in tuition scholarships for local students.” *See Exhibit B.* Additionally, former Police Chief Tom Crew worked for MWA after retiring and his wife Cindy Crew worked there for 10 years. Jane Babcock had a relative who attended MWA and Tyler McGhy was a former employee of MWA for about 6-7 years. More recently, Devon Dade who held a Director position at MWA at the time of its closing has recently been elected to the Keokuk City Council.

4. Media coverage of this case has been ongoing, thorough, and comprehensive making it likely that the potential jury pool will have been saturated with news accounts of the crime. *See Exhibit B.*

5. The Iowa Code authorizes a party, including the State of Iowa, to seek a change of venue. Iowa Code § 803.2(2) (2017). Such a motion passes constitutional muster. *See State v.*

Dist. Court of Jefferson Cnty., 238 N.W. 290, 293 (Iowa 1931) (“[T]he act granting to the state the right to a change of place of trial is not inimical to section 9, article 1, of the [Iowa] Constitution.”).

6. The grounds for a change of venue are governed by the rules of criminal procedure. Iowa R. Crim. P. 2.11(10). Specifically, the rules provide for a change of venue where “such degree of prejudice exists in the county in which the trial is to be held that there is a substantial likelihood a fair and impartial trial cannot be preserved with a jury selected from that county.” Iowa R. Crim. P. 2.11(10)(b).

7. The State is not required to offer proof that a fair trial is impossible. “The test [is] whether a ‘reasonable likelihood’ exists that petitioners could not receive a fair trial in [a particular c]ounty.” *Lloyd v. Dist. Court of Scott Cnty.*, 201 N.W.2d 720, 722 (Iowa 1972); *see State v. Elmore*, 201 N.W.2d 443, 445 (Iowa 1972) (“The question for our determination here is whether a reasonable likelihood existed that a fair trial could not be had because of the dissemination of potentially prejudicial material.”).

8. In the recent past, the Iowa Supreme Court has urged district courts to be more willing to grant motions for change of venue in the face of extensive publicity. *See State v. Robinson*, 389 N.W.2d 401, 404 (Iowa 1986) (“Where there has been extensive pretrial publicity a trial court should be more willing than in prior years to look favorably upon such a motion.”).

9. The cumulative effect of pretrial publicity, the significant community ties and involvement with MWA prior to its closure, and the polarization to one side or the other within the community after the closure of MWA creates the substantial unlikelihood that a fair and impartial jury without connections to MWA or preconceived notions or opinions about the case could be picked in Lee county.

10. Based on the above, it is clear that the State and the defendant would both face difficulties in picking a fair and impartial jury. Furthermore, judicial economy would also support a change of venue. The defendant has demanded a speedy trial. Trial starts on December 12, 2017. Defendant’s speedy trial runs on December 15, 2017. Witnesses are driving long distances or are flying in from other states to attend trial. If the parties were unable to pick a jury from Lee county, trial would have to be promptly moved to another county and witnesses may become unavailable or lengths of stays would have to be extended to account for the lost time.

WHEREFORE, the State respectfully requests this Court grant the change of venue.

/s/ DENISE A. TIMMINS

DENISE A. TIMMINS AT0007954

Assistant Attorney General

Area Prosecutions Division

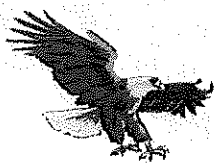
Hoover State Office Building

Des Moines IA 50319

Tel: (515) 281-3648

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Midwest Academy

References

Many Schools do not enjoy a good reputation in the communities in which they reside, and specialty among the educational community. Midwest Academy invites you to get feed back about us from those who know us best and would usually be the credits of specialty boarding schools.

Police Chief	Tom Crew	319-524-2741
Lee County Sheriff	Buck Jones	319-524-1414
Principal- Keokuk High School (2003-2008)	Dave Cane	515-955-1770
Superintendent – Keokuk School Dist.-2008)	Jane Babcock	515-994-2685
Superintendent – Keokuk School Dist. -Current	Jane Babcock	319-524-1402
Keokuk School Board Member	Tyler Mcghghy	319-795-6989
Principal Mt. Pleasant Middle School	Jason Campbell	319-385-7730
Retired Superintendent of Schools- IL	Jack Turner	319-372-5436
Mayor Keokuk City	David Gudgel	319-524-9270

Juvenile Court Officers only:

Due to heavy case load and limited time it is request that only JCO's call Mr. Wood

Juvenile Probation Officer - Keokuk	Ron Wood	319-524-6122
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We have a very strong PSA (Parent Student Association) that helps provide parent support, raises funds for the scholarship fund, and organizes the annual alumni picnic and fireworks calibration. Alumni students organize regularly scheduled reunions. To protect the privacy of our parents and students, we have not listed them on this public document. If you wish to talk to alumni or parents of current students we will provide you with those that are willing to share.

Sincerely,

MWA Admissions

Midwest Academy

319-524-3560

www.mwacademy.net

EXHIBIT A

School for troubled teens off to a good start

- by diane vance /gate city staff writer
- Aug 26, 2003

There's a quiet, studious atmosphere in the building now known as Midwest Academy. Students are relaxed and friendly with staff and teachers.

Ben Trane and Brian Vaifanua, co-owners of Midwest Academy, the new boarding school in the former Charleston Place near Summittville, are excited and energized about building a new school from the ground up.

Opened this summer, the private school has 14 students, ages 13 to 17.

Renovation of the building continues, and Vaifanua, school director, says there will be the capability to house up to 200 students in the two-story structure.

Trane, assistant school director, said Midwest Academy employs 26 people, many coming from the local community.

Students, mostly from the Midwest region, apply for school here and undergo a screening process.

"We have a marketing firm we contract with," said Trane. "But mostly, it's word of mouth. Some students are referred here by other schools."

"Where we differ from other schools is giving each individual student the opportunity to excel," said Vaifanua.

"We have students who for one reason or another aren't doing well at home or aren't doing well at school and need a different environment."

The students at Midwest Academy are not students who have been in trouble with the law, he said.

"We have two components to the program - the academics and the home living," said Trane. "Some students stay a year, others stay until they've earned a diploma. The goal is to get them ready to live at home again."

The average student stay is 12 to 14 months.

"Students work with a computer curriculum," said Trane. "It's interactive and hands-on. Students can learn with audio, visual and kinetic ways of learning."

Each student has an individualized education plan, working at their individual pace and grade level in the group.

Midwest Academy employs one accredited teacher and two tutors.

"We are accredited with the Northwest Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities and are in the process of being accredited with Iowa," said Vaifanua.

All students enter the program at a basic level and earn privileges as they go.

There is a male wing and female wing and students don't intermingle. Sleeping, eating and studying rooms are contained in the wing.

Basic level students bunk together in a large room, with beds for 12 people. An adjoining bathroom with three showers is shared between a similar dorm room with 12 bunks.

Students wear uniforms all day, every day: The boys white polo shirts and khaki shorts or pants and the girls white blouses and plaid skirts with dark vests or sweaters.

"The boys make up one team or family and the girls another. Most all of their activities are separate except we do have a co-ed student council and some co-ed activities when we go into the community," said Trane.

The students function as a family unit and refer to the staff as dorm parents.

"We also incorporate personal growth and character building into our program," said Vaifanua. "Students watch inspirational videos and hear speakers. We host seminars and workshops. They are encouraged to read scriptures and self growth books. Some meditate. There is a couple hours a week of devotionals."

Vaifanua said a community pastor/reverend is invited in once a week to conduct devotionals.

"We're non-denominational here," he said.

A typical day in the life of a Midwest Academy student is: 7 a.m. wake-up, with half an hour prep time. Students have assigned jobs, including cleaning their living areas for a half hour followed by inspection.

Breakfast is at 9 a.m., with the girls and boys eating separately.

School begins at 9:30 a.m. with an hour of academics, then an hour of physical education. Students watch a half-hour video, then go to lunch, followed by another fitness period.

There's another hour of academics, followed by the group meeting where students have a chance to discuss what's going on with them, Trane said.

Then there is an hour emotional growth type video to watch and the fourth hour of academics before dinner.

After dinner is the third fitness period of the day with one more hour of academic study.

An evening snack, a time to write "reflections" and prep time concludes the day, followed by bedtime.

"This is the schedule six days a week," said Vaifanua.

Trane showed the activity/rec room, which included weights, a ping pong table, game table and large exercise balls.

"Students also follow videos doing yoga and pilates," said Trane.

Outside is a "dipping" pool (taller than a wading pool), a basketball hoop and volleyball.

"We're building a gym in back," said Trane. "It will be a full-size high school gym. It should be ready before cold weather arrives."

Students also get involved in community service activities.

"We had them help run the games at Keokuk's Fourth of July," said Trane. "Right now, with remodeling and landscaping going on here at school, it's kept them busy to work here."

"We took students up to Nauvoo and they helped park cars and watched a performance of 'City of Joseph,'" said Vaifanua.

Students also do their own laundry, clean their rooms and help with serving meals and meal clean-up.

Not all of the students' activities in the community have been work related.

"We've gone to the park at Fort Madison, the Rams Camp in Macomb and fishing at Pollmiller Park," said Vaifanua.

Students use local medical and dental facilities and have gone bowling and to the movies in Keokuk.

Parents can visit the school anytime and students can earn privileges to visit home.

"We're here because Lowell Junkins, Dave Gudgel, Jane Babcock and Chief Dobson did their homework on us," said Vaifanua. "Mike Hickey was also helpful. There were a lot of places we could have gone to start a school, but these local people really helped us out. They are the reason we're here."

Vaifanua, from the Samoa Islands, has helped build a school in the South Pacific and was assistant director at a similar school in Utah.

"I'm thrilled to be here," he said.

Vaifanua, his wife Angie, and five children live on site in a new residence built in front of Midwest Academy.

Currently, Trane and his wife Layani, who is the school's academic coordinator, live in an apartment upstairs at the academy, but will eventually move off-site. He has also worked in similar schools in southern Utah and Ohio.

The property is owned by Litchfield Family Partnership, which operates boarding schools across the country that provide a regimented routine and discipline for troubled teens.

Litchfield bought the former Lee County home for \$500,000 in March. Midwest Academy rents the facility.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/school-for-troubled-teens-off-to-a-good-start/article_5814e7fc-575f-5807-9a5b-cd5ee1a1844f.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Midwest Academy begins with 14 students

- Aug 28, 2003
- Diane Vance/MVM News Network
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- KEOKUK -- There's a quiet, studious atmosphere in the building now known as Midwest Academy. Students are relaxed and friendly with staff and teachers.
- Ben Trane and Brian Vaifanua, co-owners of Midwest Academy, the new boarding school in the former Charleston Place near Summittville, are excited and energized about building a new school from the ground up.
- Opened this summer, the private school has 14 students, ages 13 to 17.
- Renovation of the building continues and Vaifanua, school director, says there will be the capability to house up to 200 students in the two-story structure.
- Trane, assistant school director, said Midwest Academy employs 26 people, many coming from the local community.
- Students, mostly from the Midwest region, apply for school here and undergo a screening process.
- "We have a marketing firm we contract with," said Trane. "But mostly, it's word of mouth. Some students are referred here by other schools."
- "Where we differ from other schools is giving each individual student the opportunity to excel," said Vaifanua. "We have students who, for one reason or another, aren't doing well at home or aren't doing well at school and need a different environment."
- The students at Midwest Academy are not students who have been in trouble with the law, he said.
- "We have two components to the program - the academics and the home living," said Trane. "Some students stay a year, others stay until they've earned a diploma. The goal is to get them ready to live at home again."
- The average student stay is 12 to 14 months.
- "Students work with a computer curriculum," said Trane. "It's interactive and hands-on. Students can learn with audio, visual and kinetic ways of learning."
- Each student has an individualized education plan, working at their individual pace and grade level in the group.
- Midwest Academy employs one accredited teacher and two tutors.
- "We are accredited with North West and are in the process of being accredited with Iowa," said Vaifanua.
- All students enter the program at a basic level and earn privileges as they go.
- There is a male wing and female wing and students don't intermingle. Sleeping, eating and studying rooms are contained in the wing.
- Basic level students bunk together in a large room, with beds for 12 people. An adjoining bathroom with three showers is shared between a similar dorm room with 12 bunks.
- Students wear uniforms all day, every day: The boys white polo shirts and khaki shorts or pants and the girls white blouses and plaid skirts with dark vests or sweaters.
- "The boys make up one team or family and the girls another. Most all of their activities are separate except we do have a co-ed student council and some co-ed activities when we go into the community," said Trane...

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/midwest-academy-begins-with-students/article_ef65d85f-9618-577c-9be9-1eb3d4da4050.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

New school: 'Miracle on the Mississippi'

- by diane vance /gate city staff writer
- Aug 28, 2003

Lee County economic leaders, elected officials and contractors came to an invitation-only open house at Midwest Academy Tuesday evening to say thanks to the private boarding school for choosing to call the former Charleston Place home.

"You are our gift, a great investment in our community," said Lowell Junkins, executive director of the Lee County Economic Development Group, addressing the assembled group of about 30 area residents, elected officials and 25 of the academy's staff and students.

Junkins told the story of Ben Trane (academy's assistant director) traveling through Keokuk and seeing the "For Sale" sign at the old middle school on Main Street.

"Ben met with Mayor Dave Gudgel over a year ago and had already had conversations with Superintendent Jane Babcock," he said. "Jane is a great ambassador of Keokuk. By the time I got in the picture, the Keokuk people were already courting this school, hoping to keep them from going north. When the middle school turned out to not be economically feasible, the Keokuk group looked for another site."

Junkins went on to name a number of other people in the room who had been influential in getting the Litchfield Family Partnership to buy the property - Jim Hanks, former president of the Keokuk Economic Development Corporation; Police Chief R.L. Dobson; and Mike Hickey, current president of Keokuk Economic Development.

"We're lucky to have you in our community," said Junkins to the directors, staff and students. "The facility is here today only because a mayor said, 'I want this in Lee County if I can't have it in my community.'"

"We have two mayors who think in global terms, allowing successes to occur," said Junkins, referring to Fort Madison Mayor Joe Kowzan and Gudgel.

"You were our catalyst to do this exciting regional thing," said Gudgel. "It has been an intellectual discussion, regional economic development. We knew it was right, but we hadn't done it. Then Ben showed up. And his team followed. This is the Miracle on the Mississippi."

"If we pull together, good things happen," said Junkins. "We're growing in the right direction."

Gudgel said he, Katie O'Brien, executive director of Keokuk Area Chamber of Commerce, and Dobson split the stacks of references the school provided and they contacted various communities.

"We compared notes - they all said what a fantastic organization it is," he said. "And it brings money to the community. We were expecting - not wanting, but expecting - some negatives. We never heard any.

"Mike Hickey and I traveled to Des Moines, met with the state director of education, the state human services people, and convinced them to give this school the green light," said Gudel.

He added that the academy is economic development for Lee County and will help the county in the future.

With 15 students, approximately 26 staff members and plans to grow to 200 or more students, the academy draws parents for visits and employs some local people.

Trane said he had been looking for a community with wholesome, family standards.

"Thanks to all of you who helped make this happen," Trane said. "It was a cold winter to remodel, but the warmth came from the local contractors. There is a great work ethic here."

Brian Vaifanua, director of Midwest Academy, said in the first five to six months of remodeling the building, the school has spent \$300,000 on top of the purchase price with local contractors.

"We've also had 20 parents already visit, staying at local motels, eating in restaurants and flying in and out of local airports," said Vaifanua.

"The best result is having your trust, forming relationships," he said. "So many of you have opened your hearts and talents to us."

He said the school is about results, finishing the race.

"Continue to accept us," he said. "Not just the economic aspect. I have a responsibility to work with the staff and students. I look forward to working with the community. Midwest Academy is a place for change."

A video presentation compared before and after pictures of the facility from the time it was purchased to the renovations made creating separate boys and girls wings for living and attending classes.

"Feel free to get to know the students," said Vaifanua. "The best way to hear about the school is not from all the directors, but to hear from the students. They are the key to our success."

A handful of girls in plaid skirts, white blouses and dark vests took the women on a tour of the female wing of the school, which includes a library, group meeting room, dorm rooms and bathroom, a classroom, staff office and staff sleeping rooms.

The 10 boys, in dark slacks, white shirts and neckties, escorted the men through their wing, similar, but on the other side of the common dining hall, seminar room and directors' offices.

Students, ages 13-18, are referred to the private boarding school and live a regimented life with six status levels that must be earned in progression.

Many of the students currently at Midwest Academy, picked for their leadership, transferred from similar schools to help start this school.

Eva, 14, and Tiffany, 17, came this summer, one from a school in Costa Rica, one in Jamaica.

Eva, from Colorado, said she had entered the Litchfield school program as a seventh grader and now is working at the high school level as a junior.

Tiffany of the Chicago area is also a high school junior.

Both girls said while living in an exotic location was interesting, they were glad to be back in the United States.

In their previous schools, their self-paced study was from books. In Keokuk, the students have a self-paced computer program.

Both students were chosen to come to Midwest Academy because of their earned higher status, based on academic and behavioral progress.

The students showed folders in which their academic and citizenship progress is tracked. Students accumulate points for their work.

All new students coming into the school start at level one and have to earn the next level up to a six, which on average takes a year.

Infractions cost points. Category 1 offenses - rudeness or category 2 offenses - disrespect or a student out of the area they should be in - are demerits.

"There are consequences for our behavior," said Tiffany. "The higher category offenses - such as running away, using tobacco, having inappropriate relationships - can cost many points and bring a student back down to level one."

There are no privileges at level one. Students have no personal property available to them, have an earlier bedtime, etc.

Eva and Tiffany enjoy a separate dorm room from those of lower levels of status. They have a few personal belongings, including music, radios and photo frames on the dresser and are entitled to change from six days of uniforms (required for everyone) to wearing personal clothing on Sundays, which can be jeans and a collared shirt.

A dinner followed the tours.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/new-school-miracle-on-the-mississippi/article_3bbab37a-c26a-5576-8529-fcd503345930.html

Accessed: 11/02/2016

Midwest Academy gets 77 more students

- by diane vance/gate city staff writer
- Sep 27, 2004

- Keokuk's Midwest Academy has grown to 255 students with the influx of 77 students from a school closed in Ensenada, (Baja California) Mexico, earlier this month.
- "We'd already planned to hire more staff, so this fit," said Ben Trane, assistant director of Midwest Academy. "We've hired eight new staff to accommodate the students coming from the other school."
- Midwest Academy opened 13 months ago with 14 students in the former county home, Charleston Place. There are now more than 110 people employed there as tutors, instructors, dorm parents, student supervisors and security.
- Trane said the school could hold just under 300 students, so there is a capacity for more.
- "There was nothing wrong with the school in Mexico - no abuse or problems," said Trane. "The Mexican government changed its rules about schools."
- He said the school there was not affiliated with Litchfield Family Partnership, the parent company for Midwest Academy. Litchfield operates private boarding schools providing academics, a regimented routine and discipline for teens.
- "The only association is we use the same marketing firm," said Trane.
- Since opening in August 2003, Midwest Academy has continued renovations on the building. The second story is now complete with dorm rooms housing four students per room. Plush furniture and carpeting in the common areas exude a calming, welcoming effect.
- A new 12,000 square-foot, high school regulation sized gym has been built with basketball hoops and two locker rooms with 24 showers. Students participate in physical education classes and games. The gym balcony has a fitness/weight room.
- "We'll build a skywalk connecting the gym to the school building," said Trane. "And we plan to add a 60-foot by 90-foot seminar room out in front of the building."
- "We're really delighted we came to Keokuk," said Trane, co-owner of the school. "Every other month a large group of parents come to visit their children and fill up the hotels in Keokuk. Last weekend we had 100 parents visit."

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/midwest-academy-gets-more-students/article_7ce13f24-0ef7-5c65-bc14-485bd7bfa132.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Midwest Academy buys Sinclair gas station in Montrose

- By Gerry Baksys/MVM NEWS NETWORK
- Nov 10, 2005
-
- Yes, Midwest Academy, rural Keokuk, has purchased the Sinclair gas station in Montrose. No, they are not turning it into a hotel. At least, not yet.
- Ben Trane, the assistant director at the academy, said there are several ideas for the future use of the property - a hotel among them - but nothing solid as of yet.
- “We're purchasing that gas station and the property,” Trane said. “There's been some ideas thrown around, and (the hotel) is one of them. However, there's nothing definite yet. It's a beautiful spot by the river, and we bring in a lot of parents every month to visit the school and their children. So a hotel would serve some purpose. We have also talked about using it just for stuff for our school. We could use it as a recreational area or another location for students to work at.”
- Trane said he expects the school to reach some decision on the use of the property in six to eight months. In the meantime, he said, it will continue to operate as a gas station.
- According to the academy's Web site, Midwest Academy is a specialty boarding school. It is a two-story self-contained facility which has dormitories, classrooms, a gymnasium, a cafeteria and recreation space. The academy offers a structured environment where students can progress both academically and personally, developing proper motivation and self-direction. The academy also teaches accountability, values, integrity, respect, honor and responsibility.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/midwest-academy-buys-sinclair-gas-station-in-montrose/article_0d43df10-83cb-5d70-af85-a4fa5b8a0428.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Don't believe it - Midwest Academy is not closing

- Nov 5, 2008
- Diane Vance/MVM News Network
-
- A rumor that Midwest Academy is closing is not true, said owner Ben Trane this morning.
- The privately-owned boarding school for teens needing a structured, individualized learning environment is in its fifth year.
- Opened in August 2003, the initial 14 student enrollment grew to 292 students in three years and 140 staff, mostly local residents.
- “We have 144 students now,” said Trane. “With a slow economy, our enrollment has decreased. We’ve cut some staff ... a little bit from everywhere. We’re down to 100 employees. Everyone has done a good job here. We may have to cut some more staff, but we’ll never shut down.
- “I hope our enrollment won’t shrink to 100 students. In the next couple of months we may have to lay off a few more people. There’s almost a 1 to 1.5 ratio of staff to students here.”
- Midwest Academy also operates a residential treatment center licensed to house 20, with 17 current residents in the former Mithelman Meadows property on Highway 218 south of Central Lee Schools.
- “That’s a more therapeutic setting,” said Trane. “Some students start there, some transfer. It’s a mixture of Keokuk residents and our student body.”
- Litchfield Family Partnership bought the 70-acre former Charleston Place in March 2003 for \$500,000 from Lee County.
- At a January 2004 Chamber of Commerce RAP Breakfast, Trane estimated the school would spend \$2 million renovating the building using all local contractors.
- A 12,000 square-foot, high school regulation size gym was added in 2004, complete with two locker rooms, 24 showers, basketball courts and a fitness/weight room on the balcony.
- Students come to the regimented school from across the country. Their parents come for visits often throughout a student’s 12-to-18-month stay, patronizing local hotels and businesses.
- In 2005 Midwest Academy bought the former Sinclair gas station on Highway 61 just north of Montrose. Students from the academy work in the food grill and convenience store and pump gas at the B & B Express station.
- Midwest Academy has had a relationship with the Keokuk School District since the beginning. Former Superintendent Jane Babcock worked as curriculum director at Midwest Academy.
- Midwest Academy students have played sports on Keokuk teams. The district receives some state aid in counting Midwest Academy students in the Home School Assistance Program.

- Keokuk High School special education teacher Carla Brown resigned from the district at the end of the 2007-2008 school year, listed as Midwest Academy Principal.
- This year, Keokuk School District's newly hired Gail Clark's building assignment is designated as Midwest Academy special education.
- The Keokuk High School kitchen prepares and transports all Midwest Academy meals year-round. Keokuk Middle School bakes all baked goods sent to the academy as part of those meals.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/don-t-believe-it---midwest-academy-is-not/article_d9c0e9e8-2cc8-563b-9c0f-93fa964ce10c.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

News

https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/midwest-academy-students-collect-items-for-two-local-food-pantries/article_cdf1ac37-305e-590c-a2f0-00fffc6e372.html

Midwest Academy students collect items for two local food pantries

By Diane Vance/Gate City Staff Writer Dec 31, 2008



The Mississippi River shows the impact of the Flood of 2008 in this picture taken from the Keokuk-Hamilton bridge on June 16. Not only is Victory Park submerged in the foreground, but also the George M. Verity Museum and Southside Boat Club are surrounded by water.

A suggestion from staff proved to be a learning opportunity as well as a community service project for students. And that will result in a boost to food pantries at two Keokuk churches.

Students at Midwest Academy held a two-week challenge between the boys and girls to raise money and/or collect non-perishable food items.

"We discussed collecting food items after reading in the Daily Gate City that food pantries were having a hard time keeping up," said Tara Sparrow, Midwest Academy admissions coordinator.

"Our parent support association then took over organizing the project. They organize an activity about once a month."

The two teams collected money and/or food from family. The private school's staff also donated money and brought in food items.

"We had 'wear jeans to work' days where we could dress in jeans if we paid into the food drive," said Shasta Thurman, student supervisor.

The food drive was more work than either Sparrow or Thurman had anticipated. It also was more successful. The students raised more than \$1,200 to shop with locally.

On Monday, 1,814 items will be delivered to the churches.

"The majority of this will be taken to God's Way Christian Center," said Thurman.

God's Way Christian Center, 1629 Des Moines St., Keokuk, runs a free soup kitchen four days a week as well as a food pantry and clothes closet. Midwest Academy students will deliver the food and help organize and serve dinner Monday at God's Way.

Some of the items will go to United Presbyterian Church, 102 Main St., Keokuk. The church offers a free "brown bag" meal the last Sunday each month to the community and also stocks a food pantry.

Canned foods, boxed macaroni, breakfast cereal, bottles of ketchup, salad dressings, jars of peanut butter, Ramen noodle packages and so much more was piled in a spare room at Midwest Academy.

On Tuesday, three upper level students counted the boys' collections. The girls'

stockpile had already been counted and sorted.

"I went shopping a week ago," said Tony Urban, a student. "Another guy and I went to Walmart. We filled a cart with food items. We selected the items. We ended up buying foods and juices that might appeal to kids."

Jacob Eilerman also shopped with another student at Walmart on Monday.

"We had \$150 and filled two shopping carts," he said.

Thurman made four shopping trips with the boys team. Part of the challenge was to track purchases and stay within the amount of cash each team took shopping.

"We had to put some stuff back," said Urban about his shopping trip.

Eilerman calculated how much was in the carts, removed one can of tuna fish and ended up with just a few cents to spare.

"It taught me how to grocery shop with a budget," he said. "It was a challenge to figure out how to buy the necessary staples."

Each team spent the donations they had worked to collect. Midwest Academy girls collected less money than the boys yet came out ahead in the number of food items they were able to buy.

"It's a competition to see which team purchased more items," said Thurman. "The winning team will get a party."

She would not disclose the final food counts to Urban, Eilerman and Suvham Metra who helped count the boys' food items on Tuesday.

"It will be announced on Eagle News," she told them.

The boys collected 812 items; the girls, who chose to shop at Aldi's, have 1,002 items to donate to the churches.

School board considers day treatment program

- By Megan Spees
- Feb 15, 2011

Staff Writer

A day treatment program at Midwest Academy could provide assistance to about eight Keokuk High School students who have severe behavioral issues or are falling behind in earning credits for graduation.

Ben Trane, owner and president of the boarding school located on the outskirts of Keokuk, told the Keokuk School Board Monday that Midwest Academy already provides \$200,000 to \$300,000 a year in scholarships to allow students in the community to receive a residential education.

Students in the day program will only attend Midwest Academy during school hours and return home when classes are over. It's a nine-week program that would allow participants to return to KHS at the beginning of a new term. Core subjects such as math, science and English are taught. Character building instruction and counseling are provided.

Gary Benda, associate principal at the high school, questioned the effectiveness of the program if, at the end of each day, a student goes home to an environment where expectations are low.

"How are they going to improve when they're going back home?" Benda asked.

Trane said parental involvement is a key component of the day treatment program. Each parent signs a contract agreeing to attend seminars related to his or her child's education. If a parent pulls his or her student out of the program, the district is reimbursed for the days that student attended.

Linda Beck, associate principal at Keokuk Middle School, said the board needs to look not only at the monetary cost to the district but also how the program would save teachers time and attention spent on dealing with tioen spent on dealing with the behavior of only one or two students in a classroom.

Students are admitted to the day program through principal referrals.

Board President Tyler McGhghy works as a counselor at Midwest Academy. Board member Alka Khanolkar wondered if a legal conflict of interest would exist.

"He would need to remove himself from discussions regarding the program," said district business manager Greg Reynolds.

An agreement between Midwest Academy and Keokuk School District is being reviewed by the district's legal counsel.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/school-board-considers-day-treatment-program/article_81075d7b-c04e-5a24-a147-01c4cce4bc05.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Academy is a Keokuk success

- By Cindy Iutzi/Gate City Staff Writer
- Jan 16, 2004
-
- Ben Trane, co-owner of Midwest Academy of rural Keokuk, answered the apparently oft asked question, "How do you end up in Keokuk, Iowa?" for a rapt audience at Thursday's Keokuk Area Chamber of Commerce RAP Breakfast.
- He told the story of his long trek across the Midwest, driving, looking, watching, checking and hoping to find the academy's ideal location.
- His mission was to find a hospitable place that embraces the core values taught by his year-round boarding school for youth that are "struggling at home and making poor choices ... kids who need intervention and a more structured environment." He wanted a community with good people, strong standards and high family values, he said.
- Trane's trip started in July 2002 and one late, hot, summer night he arrived in Keokuk.
- "I ... got tired and thought I'd put in for the night," he said.
- But it wasn't that easy. Trane soon discovered that every motel room for miles around was booked for the dedication of the Nauvoo temple.
- He decided to sleep in his car and described a night of sweltering heat (at least 100 degrees, he believes) and attacks by mosquitoes (swarms, he is sure) every time he opened a window for air.
- "One of the worse nights of my life" turned into good fortune for Midwest Academy, according to Trane.
- First attracted by the old middle school building on Main Street, Trane determined the building would cost too much to renovate and moved on to a location in Wisconsin. The purchase of property in Wisconsin seemed like a sure thing.
- But when the 70-acre Charleston Place property was put up for sale, he and co-owner Brian Vaifanua were among the first to hear about it from Lee County Economic Development Group Executive Director Lowell Junkins. They were given the red carpet tour.
- Intensive recruiting on the part of Keokuk Mayor David Gudgel, Junkins, Keokuk Economic Development Corporation board President Mike Hickey and Keokuk School District Superintendent Jane Babcock helped win the day, Trane said. When Wisconsin school laws inhibited the year-round requirements of the academy, Trane and Vaifanua looked no further than Keokuk.
- Now Midwest Academy is thriving at its Keokuk location, Trane said.
- The school's student base has quadrupled since it opened in August 2003; word of the academy's success rate is traveling by word of mouth from the East Coast to the West Coast and from Chicago to Kansas City, Mo.; and its students' lives are being changed for the better, both academically and with their families, he said.
- Trane said some students have attended the academy and returned to their own schools for graduation, with one in San Diego, Calif., saying at the ceremony, "the best experience of my life was to go to Midwest Academy in Keokuk, Iowa."
- When filled to capacity, the school will have 250 to 300 students, Trane said.

- From 14 students and 26 employees in its opening days, the school already has grown to 50 attendees and 70 employees. Just this month 15 students were added, a growth rate that is quicker than academy owners thought would happen, Trane said.
- Typical time stay for students is from 12 to 15 months, although 18 months is the ideal duration for making a difference in a teen's life, he said.
- "It isn't a quick fix," he said. "It takes a long time."
- Students' ages are 13 to 17, with some electing to stay on at the facility after turning 18.
- A merit-based program, students earn everything they have in a six level program buttressed by counseling, self-esteem building and communication skills education.
- Students are self-directed, Trane said. Teachers teach, but students direct their own progress.
- Renovation to the academy's upstairs is under way and a gymnasium is being added to the rear of the structure, he said.
- Trane estimates \$2 million will have been spent on the building by the time it is finished, all with work from local businesses.
- He reiterated his high praise for Keokuk's leaders as well as the businesses and retailers he and other staff members have contacted. He said the people of Keokuk are warm and welcoming and have a "great community."
- Trane added that throughout his travels, he has never seen anything like Keokuk's RAP breakfasts.
- "What a great idea," he said. "This is the only community that does something like this - mingles shoulders - that's why we're here."

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/academy-is-a-keokuk-success/article_3e2ccdc2-2400-589a-9d4a-a7ab7ca341f5.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Midwest Academy part of sexual abuse probe

- CINDY IUTZI MVM News Network
- Jan 29, 2016



CAPTION: The first of two search warrants was executed Thursday afternoon at the Midwest Academy's main campus at 2416 340th St., Keokuk. The searches are part of an investigation into allegations of sexual abuse involving a Midwest Academy staff member and a former academy student.

KEOKUK – A troubled-youth treatment center and affiliated site, both in South Lee County, were the scenes of a coordinated raid at around noon Thursday with more than 30 law enforcement officers participating.

Two search warrants were executed at Midwest Academy and the former Mithelman Meadows.

The search warrants stem from an investigation into allegations of sexual abuse involving a staff member of Midwest Academy and a former academy student, according to a DCI statement released Thursday afternoon.

Personnel with the Iowa Department of Criminal Investigation Major Crimes Unit, Special Enforcement Operations Bureau, Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, DCI Crime Lab Crime Scene Team, State Fire Marshal Division, Iowa State Patrol Division of Intelligence and Fusion Center, Federal Bureau of Investigation and Lee County Sheriff's Office executed two search warrants.

The first search warrant was served at the facility's main campus, 2416 340th St., Keokuk, and the second at 2818 Highway 218, Montrose.

Lee County Sheriff Jim Sholl said a briefing was conducted at about 10 a.m. Thursday at the Lee County Correctional Center.

He took part in the initial action to help form a perimeter that would prevent anyone from fleeing. No one attempted to leave the grounds, Sholl said.

At about 3:15 p.m., the Midwest Academy grounds were still closed to anyone except employees going to work, a situation enforced by a sheriff's deputy.

Keokuk Mayor Tom Marion said Thursday that he was caught off guard by the news.

"I had no forewarning," Marion said. "I hope this is an isolated incident, not a full-blown investigation."

No further information was available this morning, although messages were left with DCI Public Information Officer Alex Murphy.

About Midwest Academy

Midwest Academy is self-described as a "therapeutic boarding school (that) has been helping families for more than a decade," according to the facility's website, midwestacademy.net.

"We provide struggling teens with a safe, structured and disciplined environment," the website claims.

The academic program, designed for youth ages 13 to 17, is described as "impactful" along with therapy and seminars, and "provides a safe, comfortable, structured and disciplined environment while offering the industry's best academics, therapy and seminar programs. Our powerful, proven and unique system teaches teenagers and their families accountability, responsibility, teamwork, integrity, self-awareness and self-reliance."

Midwest Academy was opened in 2003 by Brian Vaifanua, and was welcomed to Keokuk as a stride in economic development.

At capacity, it would be at 250 to 300 students, according to an estimate by then facility director Ben Trane. In its opening days, there were 14 students and 26 employees, growing to 50 students and 70 employees by the next year. Students could expect a stay of 12 to 15 months with 18 months the ideal duration, Trane said in a Daily Gate City article.

“A merit-based program, students earn everything they have in a six-level program buttressed by counseling, self-esteem building and communication skills education,” according to Trane.

Civil suit

On Jan. 15, 2010, the fifth version of a civil lawsuit against 37 defendants by 133 plaintiffs was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Utah by the law offices of Windle Turley in Dallas Texas, and James McConkie II, Salt Lake City, Utah.

The entire 2010 version of the lawsuit can be found at heal-online.org/hurley.pdf.

Among the named defendants are Midwest Academy, Vaifanua and the alleged owners of the company.

“No. 32. – Defendant Midwest Academy is a Limited Liability Company organized under the laws of the State of Iowa, is a ‘WWASPS Enterprise’ associated-in-fact residential school,” according to the lawsuit. “This defendant may be served with process on its registered agent: Mark R. Adams, West Des Moines or this defendant may be served by serving Robert B. Lichfield at 317 Lichfield Lane, Toquerville, Utah or at S1240 E 100S No. 9 St. George, Utah, because Robert B. Lichfield is principal in charge of the entire WWASPS Enterprise, the association-in-fact complained of herein, and this defendant was functioning as Lichfield’s alter ego.”

The lawsuit claims plaintiffs “were subjected to physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse at various WWASPS Enterprise facilities. Such abuses were inflicted on some children for several years. In many instances the abuse could be accurately described as torture of children.”

Calls were made this morning to the Turley and McConkie law firms, but due to the time zone difference, no contact was made.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/midwest-academy-part-of-sexual-abuse-probe/article_e8dd456c-0395-5227-ad9f-101ac03ab2e0.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

UPDATE: at 5 p.m. Friday – DHS gives parents 24 hours to pick their kids up from Midwest Academy according to a parent.

- By Cindy Iutzi dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Jan 29, 2016



CAPTION: An Iowa Department of Criminal Investigation Crime Scene Unit vehicle was parked in front of Midwest Academy Thursday in rural Keokuk, hours after officers executed two search warrants.

Updated at 5 p.m. Friday

Mark Sobotta of Lindenhurst, Ill., had to leave work early Friday afternoon to drive to Keokuk and pick his daughter up from Midwest Academy. He was not happy about it.

“This is what’s going on and this is my concern,” he said. “Your Health and Family Services of Iowa has infiltrated Midwest Academy and they are giving parents 24 hours to pick up their kids or they’re going to put them in a shelter”

Sobotta said Midwest Academy is being closed.

“There’s not just one child there, there are 100 to 150 children at Midwest Academy,” he said.

Read Monday's Daily Gate City for more about this story.

Updated at 11 p.m. Friday

The Iowa Department of Human Services was called to Midwest Academy Thursday after two search warrants regarding an allegation of sexual abuse were executed at about 12:30 p.m. by state, federal and local agencies.

According to a statement from the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, DHS personnel conducted 28 assessments at Midwest Academy.

No charges have been filed or arrests made to date. DCI has not received any further allegations involving Midwest Academy.

“Agents continue to work together to thoroughly investigate this very complex area,” according to the statement.

Call 800-225-5324 with information about Midwest Academy beneficial to the investigation.

Agencies involved in the execution of the search warrants include the Iowa Department of Public Safety’s Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation’s Major Crime Unit, Special Enforcement Operations Bureau, Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, Crime Lab Crime Scene Team, State Fire Marshal’s Division Division of Intelligence and Fusion Center, Iowa State Patrol and Lee County Sheriff's Office.

ORIGINAL STORY:

By Cindy Iutzi

dgceditor@dailygate.com

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The search warrants stem from an investigation into allegations of alleged sexual abuse involving a staff member of Midwest Academy and a former academy student, according to a DCI statement released Thursday afternoon.

Personnel with the Iowa Department of Criminal Investigation Major Crimes Unit, Special Enforcement Operations Bureau, Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, DCI Crime Lab Crime Scene Team, State Fire Marshal Division, Iowa State Patrol Division of Intelligence and Fusion Center, Federal Bureau of Investigation and Lee County Sheriff's Office conducted the search.

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Neither law firm claims to be handling the legal matter, representatives said Friday.

The entire 2010 version of the lawsuit can be found at heal-online.org/hurley.pdf.

Among the named defendants are Midwest Academy, Vafanua and the alleged owners of the company.

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The lawsuit claims plaintiffs “were subjected to physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse at various WWASPS Enterprise facilities. Such abuses were inflicted on some children for several years. In many instances the abuse could be accurately described as torture of children.”

Calls were made this morning to the Turley and McConkie law firms, but due to the time zone difference, no contact was made.

A news conference was held at 10 a.m. today at the sheriff’s office. An update will be made at dailygate.com after the meeting.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/update-at-p-m-friday-dhs-gives-parents-hours-to/article_c0260151-e890-5f90-8c07-e8e66ba5dce6.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Academy works toward license

- By Cindy Iutzi dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Feb 8, 2016

Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane announced Friday that 60 facility workers have been laid off due to the closure of the boarding school last week by the Iowa Department of Human Services.

MWA is located in Keokuk, but has served families from throughout the nation.

On Jan. 28, Midwest Academy and the former Mithelman Meadow facility were searched by a multi-agency group of law enforcement officers and child protective services personnel.

“Although the search was unexpected and frightening for our staff and students, the law enforcement agencies acted in a respectful, thorough manner,” Trane said in a news statement he released Friday. “We appreciate law enforcement looking into allegations in an effort to keep us all safe. We are extremely fortunate to have such a wonderful sheriff’s department with competent and professional staff, also the DCI, state fire marshals, state troopers, and FBI were extremely thorough in their duties. We feel secure knowing so many competent people are working on this case.”

Trane is waiting to hear from the DHS about reopening the school or if it has been permanently closed. As of Friday evening, he’d had no word from the state.

“There’s nothing to say we can’t reopen, but we’re waiting to be sure,” he said.

Trane has applied for a state license for Midwest Academy Treatment Center, 2818 U.S. Highway 218, Montrose.

The licensed treatment center would provide therapeutic services to troubled teens.

A state license isn’t offered for boarding schools in Iowa, otherwise he would apply, Trane said.

“We want to thank the community for its support through the volunteers, the service, the prayers, and those who reached out to us at this difficult time,” according to the statement. “We are saddened to announce that we had to lay off our final 60 employees. These staff members worked late and long hours giving of their talents and service.

“They were dedicated, conscientious and caring individuals. Our Midwest students were very fortunate to have such a quality, hardworking and knowledgeable group of people involved in their school career and their lives. We want to thank our students also for starting, signing and sending out petitions in support of our school. We want to thank the parents who organized

themselves, offered their services and time, started petitions, called and recalled local authorities, and gave us their support.”

While the facility is closed, the five families who live on the grounds will continue to live there, Trane said. MWA has a house and four apartments for resident staff.

Background

Midwest Academy was established in 2003 as private therapeutic boarding school for troubled youth in the United States and abroad.

It employed more than 60 local people and housed more than 90 students.

“The choice to begin operating Midwest Academy in Keokuk was an easy one,” Trane said in his statement. “The building and grounds that had been the former Lee County Home were purchased and our mission to help young people began.

“Under our direction and as the facility progressed, it allowed us to provide our students and staff with dorms, classrooms, offices, two cafeterias, lounges, a kitchen, a quality gymnasium, a workout room, a seminar building and an outdoor recreational area.

“Choosing Keokuk gave us the opportunity to be part of a smaller community, one where people are involved and where values, responsibility and work ethic are an important part of everyday life. During our 13 years of operation in Keokuk, we have been proud to be a part of a city which supported us and treated us like family.”

Community impact

In the past 13 years, Trane estimates that MWA has contributed to the purchase of more than 60,000 meals from local restaurants, the use of more than 20,000 hotel rooms, provided more than 55,000 community service hours, and spent more than \$50 million in goods, services and employee payroll.

Midwest also has awarded more than \$750,000 in tuition scholarships for local students.

Trane said that MWA students have enrolled in classes at Southeastern Community College, participated in sports programs through Keokuk High School, and participated in community activities such as the Labor Day Parade and various service projects.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/academy-works-toward-license/article_0fa00003-09c3-5edb-b7b4-4ac88374b10c.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Midwest Academy announces worker layoff

- By Cindy Iutzi dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Feb 5, 2016



Midwest Treatment is located at 2818 U.S. Highway 218, Montrose, the site of the former Mithelman Meadows. Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane is trying to get a state license to operate the facility as a therapeutic center.

Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane announced Friday that 60 facility workers have been laid off due to the closure of the boarding school last week by the Iowa Department of Human Services.

MWA is located in Keokuk, but served families from throughout the nation.

Trane said during an interview that he's waiting to hear from the DHS about reopening the school.

"There's nothing to say we can't reopen, but we're waiting to be sure," he said.

In the meantime he's working to get a state license for Midwest Academy Treatment Center at 2818 U.S. Highway 2818, Montrose.

The licensed treatment center would provide therapeutic services.

Trane said a state license isn't offered for boarding schools in Iowa.

On Thursday, Jan. 28, Midwest Academy and the former Mithelman Meadows facility were searched by a multi-agency group of law enforcement officers and child protective services personnel.

“Although the search was unexpected and frightening for our staff and students, the law enforcement agencies acted in a respectful, thorough manner,” Trane said in a statement Friday. “We appreciate law enforcement looking into allegations in an effort to keep us all safe. We are extremely fortunate to have such a wonderful sheriff’s department with competent and professional staff, also the DCI, state fire marshals, state troopers, and FBI were extremely thorough in their duties. We feel secure knowing so many competent people are working on this case.”

“We want to thank the community for its support through the volunteers, the service, the prayers, and those who reached out to us at this difficult time,” Trane stated. “We are saddened to announce that we had to lay off our final 60 employees. These staff members worked late and long hours giving of their talents and service.

“They were dedicated, conscientious, and caring individuals. Our Midwest students were very fortunate to have such a quality, hardworking and knowledgeable group of people involved in their school career and their lives. We want to thank our students also for starting, signing and sending out petitions in support of our school. We want to thank the parents who organized themselves, offered their services and time, started petitions, called and recalled local authorities, and gave us their support.”

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“We wanted to thank the community for its support through the volunteers, the service, the prayers, and those who reached out to us at this difficult time,” according to his news release. “We are saddened to announce that we had to lay off our final 60 employees. These staff members worked late and long hours giving of their talents and service.

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“We wanted to thank our students also for starting, signing and sending out petitions in support of our school. We want to thank the parents who organized themselves, offered their services and time, started petitions, called and recalled local authorities, and gave us their support.

“We love and appreciate the wonderful people in this community,” Trane added. “You have made such a difference to our students, their families, and to us.”

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/midwest-academy-announces-worker-layoff/article_fbc189f2-3aca-54e8-a42e-87008f5f7550.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

State to assist Lee Co. in potential abuse case

- By Cindy Iutzi dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Feb 10, 2016

An ongoing investigation into a complaint alleging a Midwest Academy student was sexually assaulted by a staff member, has prompted Lee County Attorney Michael Short to request additional assistance should the matter result in criminal charges.

“It would involve complex litigation and we just don’t have the time or resources for something like that,” Short said.

A multi-agency force executed a search warrant Jan. 28-29 at the academy in Keokuk.

After the search was complete, personnel from the search team met with Short,

including the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Human Services as well as a representative from the U.S. Attorney’s Office.

Short later asked the Iowa Attorney General’s Office for help in reviewing the potential criminal case regarding MWA, said Geoff Greenwood, spokesman for the AG’s office. Short’s request was granted.

Greenwood said that “as a matter of course, we have attorneys who advise DHS on child welfare matters. Additionally, we are looking at certain representations made by the school.”

Twelve days later

Now 12 days after the initial search while evidence gathered from MWA is being processed and official interviews are conducted, 150 people closely associated with the boarding school are in limbo.

Some 90-plus students generally identified by the academy as troubled have been removed from the institution as ordered by DHS, and 60 laid off indefinitely.

Parents/guardians were given 24 hours to pick up their children from the academy. Responsibility for any who were left behind was assumed by DHS, which announced at the time of the closure it would offer shelter services.

At the time, authorities announced that DHS had made 28 individual assessments. Since then, the agency hasn’t been willing to divulge whether any of the students, who could be anywhere from ages 13 to 17, are under their protection.

DHS public relations officer Amy McCoy responded via email to several questions Tuesday about the children involved: How many were not picked up from Midwest Academy by parents or guardians? If there were some who were not, where are they – foster homes or shelters? What is their future? Is there no state licensure or oversight for private training/boarding schools?

“There is no operational or programmatic oversight provided by DHS to the facility,” McCoy wrote. “The department does have the authority to investigate allegations of abuse at almost any facility where it is reported.

“Guardians of the children determine their placements, or the courts may become involved in making placements if there is concern for the child’s safety.

“DHS may monitor the ongoing safety needs of children involved in child abuse assessments, but (the public is) not entitled to this information which is confidential under the law. Child abuse information is confidential to protect the victim.

“We continue our assessments and law enforcement continues their investigation.

“Law enforcement have noted it may be several weeks before more information is released.”

Since the removal of students by DHS, Trane has been unable to conduct business. Short has said because the academy isn’t licensed by the state, nothing prevents owner Ben Trane from reopening.

The Daily Gate City has received numerous calls and emails from former students who want to tell their story, as well as contacts from people who support the academy.

As the official status of the academy situation develops, more information will be made available.

DCI spokesman Alex Murphy said Tuesday there is no new information available from his agency, and offered no timeline for the ongoing investigation.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/state-to-assist-lee-co-in-potential-abuse-case/article_98726643-31c3-57b1-a042-986948d6892e.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

County attorney seeks reinforcements in Midwest Academy abuse case

- CINDY IUTZI dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Feb 11, 2016

KEOKUK – An ongoing investigation into a complaint alleging a Midwest Academy student was sexually assaulted by a staff member, has prompted Lee County Attorney Michael Short to request additional assistance should the matter result in criminal charges.

“It would involve complex litigation and we just don’t have the time or resources for something like that,” Short said.

A multi-agency force executed a search warrant Jan. 28-29 at the academy in Keokuk.

After the search was complete, personnel from the search team met with Short, including the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Human Services as well as a representative from the U.S. Attorney’s Office.

Short later asked the Iowa Attorney General’s Office for help in reviewing the potential criminal case regarding MWA, said Geoff Greenwood, spokesman for the AG’s office. Short’s request was granted.

Greenwood said that “as a matter of course, we have attorneys who advise DHS on child welfare matters. Additionally, we are looking at certain representations made by the school.”

Twelve days later

Now 12 days after the initial search while evidence gathered from MWA is being processed and official interviews are conducted, 150 people closely associated with the boarding school are in limbo.

Some 90-plus students generally identified by the academy as troubled have been removed from the institution as ordered by DHS, and 60 academy workers have been laid off indefinitely.

Parents/guardians were given 24 hours to pick up their children from the academy. Responsibility for any who were left behind was assumed by DHS, which announced at the time of the closure it would offer shelter services.

At the time, authorities announced that DHS had made 28 individual assessments. Since then, the agency hasn’t been willing to divulge whether any of the students, who could be anywhere from ages 13 to 17, are under their protection.

Checking on students

DHS public relations officer Amy McCoy responded via email to several questions Tuesday about the children involved: How many were not picked up from Midwest Academy by parents or guardians? If there were some who were not, where are they – foster homes or shelters? What is their future? Is there no state licensure or oversight for private training/boarding schools?

“There is no operational or programmatic oversight provided by DHS to the facility,” McCoy wrote. “The department does have the authority to investigate allegations of abuse at almost any facility where it is reported.

“Guardians of the children determine their placements, or the courts may become involved in making placements if there is concern for the child’s safety.

“DHS may monitor the ongoing safety needs of children involved in child abuse assessments, but (the public is) not entitled to this information which is confidential under the law. Child abuse information is confidential to protect the victim.

“We continue our assessments and law enforcement continue their investigation,” McCoy said. “Law enforcement have noted it may be several weeks before more information is released.”

Since the removal of students by DHS, Trane has been unable to conduct business. Short has said because the academy isn’t licensed by the state, nothing prevents owner Ben Trane from reopening.

Former students have stories to tell

The Daily Gate City has received numerous calls and emails from former students who want to tell their story, as well as contacts from people who support the academy.

As the official status of the academy situation develops, more information will be made available.

DCI spokesman Alex Murphy said Tuesday there is no new information available from his agency, and offered no timeline.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/county-attorney-seeks-reinforcements-in-midwest-academy-abuse-case/article_5c242913-3cdf-51a5-85b1-7879e47517f8.html

Accessed: 11/02/2016

Feds, state return for records

- By Cindy Iutzi dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Feb 12, 2016



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- CAPTION: A U-Haul at Midwest Academy contains boxes and filing cabinets of records confiscated Thursday by the FBI and Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation at Midwest Academy, Keokuk
-
- Federal, state and county law enforcement officers were back Thursday afternoon at Midwest Academy in Keokuk, following up on a Jan. 28-29 search of the grounds.
- The first warrants stemmed from an investigation of alleged sexual abuse involving an MWA staff member and former student of the academy.
- MWA is a therapeutic boarding school that enrolls students from around the world.
- The Iowa Department of Human Services also participated in the first search, conducted 28 abuse assessments and on Jan. 29 ordered the roughly 90 academy students to be removed from the school.
- On Thursday, personnel with the Federal Bureau of Investigations and Division of Criminal Investigation executed a search warrant for records, according to an FBI officer in the building lobby who showed his badge and identified himself as Bill.
- Bill said the large U-Haul truck parked in front of the academy would transport records being removed from MWA, and probably would be full by the time they were finished. In addition to stacked cardboard file boxes, the U-Haul also contained entire file cabinets.
- In the drive in front of the building, a large white van attached to a Boy Scouts of America trailer was filled with boxes containing what appeared to be files.

- Bill said the contents of the van and trailer also would be loaded into the U-Haul.
- MWA owner Ben Trane, a woman and Lee County Sheriff Investigator Stacy Weber to the parking area from a house on academy property.
- Not part of lawsuit
- Trane said he'd read a recent Daily Gate City story that cited a lawsuit (filed by 133 plaintiffs against a list of defendants) in which MWA along with World Wide Association of Specialty Programs, former MWA owner Brian Viafanua and more than 30 additional entities appeared as defendants.
- In a recent email about the lawsuit, which was dismissed in 2010, Trane wrote, "Midwest Academy has never been in the WWASP organization. Also it is completely inappropriate to bring us into other schools' issues that have nothing to do with us.
- "We are a stand alone company with no ties to the schools in your article. We should not be held responsible for WWASP or other schools' problems."

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/feds-state-return-for-records/article_5465f590-838a-58c9-b306-6a279d678ec7.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

FBI, others seize Academy's records

- CINDY IUTZI dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Feb 12, 2016



CAPTION: This white van, as well as a U-Haul vehicle, were full of records collected by the FBI and other agencies during another search of Midwest Academy Thursday afternoon.

KEOKUK – Federal, state and county law enforcement officers were back Thursday afternoon at Midwest Academy in Keokuk, following up on a search of the grounds Jan. 28-29.

The first warrants stemmed from an investigation of alleged sexual abuse involving an MWA staff member and former student of the academy.

MWA is a therapeutic boarding school that enrolls students from around the world.

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"We are a stand alone company with no ties to the schools in your article. We should not be held responsible for WWASP or other schools' problems."Source:
https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/fbi-others-seize-academy-s-records/article_2d8128ab-33e5-5bb6-ae71-b75081690272.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Former students speak

- By Ryan Foley Associated Press
- Feb 15, 2016

A boarding school for troubled teenagers in Iowa that is being investigated by the FBI routinely kept pupils in small concrete “isolation boxes” for days or weeks and wouldn’t let them out unless they sat in a specific posture for 24 hours, according to several former students.

Six former students recently told The Associated Press about abuse they say they suffered while attending Midwest Academy in Keokuk.

They said the dark, cell-like punishment rooms were often filled with the sounds of students’ screams and motivational recordings piped in through speakers. Surveillance cameras and staff members kept watch.

“You spend your time pounding your head against the wall. You can’t sleep because there is a lot of noise. A lot of girls like to scream in there. You basically look forward to bathroom breaks and those moments when you can get out of your box,” said Emily Beaman, 17, of Wheaton, Ill.

Beaman said that after weeks of isolation, she got out in July only after cutting herself with a bottle cap and begging emergency responders to place her elsewhere. She said an earlier escape attempt failed.

The students, who attended the academy between 2008 and September 2015, said they and their classmates mutilated themselves, hated the lack of activity and natural light and lost weight due to small meals. Some said they were scarred by the experience months or years later.

Officers raided the academy Jan. 28 to investigate allegations that a staff member sexually assaulted a student. The investigation has since expanded to other possible criminal activity and abuse.

Academy owner Ben Trane declined to comment on abuse claims at a news conference this month and didn’t respond to AP interview requests. The academy’s 90 students were removed and it has been temporarily closed. Three students interviewed by the AP said they had spoken with the FBI.

Lauren Snyder, 17, of Springfield, Mo., recalled begging to get out of isolation last year, after an employee turned up the audio recordings so loud that the speakers blew out and were making a screeching noise.

“It was complete hell,” she said.

Snyder said she eventually attempted suicide by tying a sock around her neck, and was sent to a psychiatric hospital the next day.

After being placed in isolation her first day for refusing to take out a belly-button ring, Sarah Wilson said she made a point not to return.

“I knew I would lose my mind in there,” said Wilson, 20, of Rock Island, Ill.

School for misbehaved kids

The academy said it provides “struggling teens with a safe, structured and disciplined environment.”

Many middle- and upper-class families from Midwest states and beyond sent misbehaving teenagers to the academy, which costs roughly \$5,000 per month. Trane has said the students were fortunate to have its staff in their lives. Other supporters include parents who said the program saved teens’ lives.

As a privately funded school without state-ordered placements, the academy didn’t require a license to operate and was otherwise unregulated.

“It flew under the radar,” said Drake University professor Jerry Foxhoven, an Iowa juvenile law expert who’d never heard of the program previously.

alleged long-term

isolation

Foxhoven said long-term isolation can be very damaging for juveniles, exacerbating mental illnesses and causing lasting effects that may include post-traumatic stress disorder. He said parents wouldn’t be allowed to keep children in isolation for weeks without facing abuse allegations, and the academy shouldn’t, either.

Former students said the school kept parents in the dark by strictly limiting and monitoring their communications. Only now, they say, are some of their claims being taken seriously.

A typical academy day started with physical education, followed by hours of online-based school work and meetings. Former students said the goal for many was to avoid an “out-of-school suspension” for violating rules, recalling that fighting and insubordination were some reasons they were put in isolation.

“That is the worst I’ve ever been treated,” said Shaun McCarthy, 19, of Avoca, Iowa, who said he was lucky to go into isolation only twice. “It’s not humane.”

McCarthy complained about the small meals and lack of stimulation, but said it was worse for others. Students who reach “level 3” in the academy’s points-based advancement system help

staff watch the boxes. In that role, McCarthy said he saw one girl puncture her finger, draw on the walls with her blood and go to the bathroom on the room's floor before staff intervened. No one else would clean up the bodily fluids, so it fell to him.

seclusion

To get out, students said they had to sit in a certain way for 24 hours. Sometimes, lengthy essays were required.

"They use seclusion preemptively and as a punitive measure," said former student James Farris, 24, a nursing assistant in St. Petersburg, Fla. "This is illegal in public health care settings, yet somehow they get away with it."

Farris recalled waking up in an isolation box on his 18th birthday and demanding his release, screaming when it took hours to accomplish. He said he had nightmares for years.

Rachel Adkisson, 19, of Des Moines, said she was put in isolation for refusing to run during gym and had lost 20 pounds when she left two weeks later. She said she told the FBI about another girl who tried to kill herself by tying her bra strap around her neck.

"It's like torture," Adkisson said. "You think it's never going to end. You think, how can a human do this to another person?"

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/former-students-speak/article_652d0de1-5b33-5b62-a22f-b29f8cec53d8.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Records: Three-year history of complaints at Midwest Academy

- Feb 16, 2016

KEOKUK (AP) – Public records show five allegations of sex offenses were reported by former students, students or staffers at Midwest Academy in Keokuk over the past three years, and the state Department of Human Services has identified 19 abuse cases at the school.

In a copyrighted story, the Des Moines Register reported that five former students made claims of widespread sex abuse and misconduct as part of a federal lawsuit filed seven years ago. It was dismissed on jurisdictional grounds, and its merits were never decided.

Police raided the boarding school for troubled teenagers and a nearby treatment center on Jan. 28 and Jan. 29 to investigate allegations that a staff member sexually assaulted a student. The investigation has since expanded to other possible criminal activity and abuse.

Academy owner Ben Trane has not responded to interview requests from The Associated Press. At a Feb. 8 news conference, he declined to answer questions about the sex assault allegations and addressed only the raid and the closure of the facilities.

A privately funded school without state-ordered placements, the academy didn't need a license to operate and was otherwise unregulated. The facilities have been closed, and all 90 or so residents either have been returned to their parents or transferred to shelters.

Lee County Sheriff Lee Sholl told the newspaper that he didn't know all the details about the 19 "founded" abuse cases identified by the state agency. The "founded" label means evidence suggested some type of abuse had occurred. But Sholl also said none of the 19 cases were prosecuted criminally, mainly because the evidence needed to back criminal case charges differs from what's required for the state agency to get involved.

"The criteria for a founded case by DHS (don't) necessarily lead to a criminal investigation or prosecution," Sholl said.

Sholl said the sexual assault allegation resulting in the raid was supported by corroborating evidence.

"But we're still a long ways from being able to prosecute," he said.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/records-three-year-history-of-complaints-at-midwest-academy/article_298b1213-6b0b-53f3-a019-d56d7312830b.html

Accessed: 11/02/2016

Alleged sexual abuse by Academy owner part of FBI, DCI investigation

- By Cindy Iutzi dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Feb 19, 2016

Information about recent raids at Midwest Academy and Midwest Treatment Center came to light through access to Lee County Attorney Michael Short's request that the court make search warrants used in the investigation be off limits to the public and news media.

In his request to seal the search warrants, Short reasons that minimizing exposure to news outlets prior to charges being filed would protect the investigation, the Midwest Academy staff and students.

Short is concerned that releasing information early could color statements when potential witnesses are interviewed by investigating officers. Also, the alleged victim was a minor when the alleged abuse incident occurred.

Midwest Academy in Keokuk is a boarding/training school for troubled teens, and Midwest Treatment Center in Montrose is a therapeutic treatment facility, ancillary to MWA.

The FBI and Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation executed search warrants twice at MWA and MTC, once on Jan. 28-29, and a second time on Feb. 1.

The January search resulted in about 90 students being sent home by the Department of Human Services after it assessed 19 of the students for abuse or neglect as related to episodes of lengthy confinement in "out of school suspension" rooms.

That effectively shut down the school.

On Feb. 1, the FBI and DCI returned to the academy with a U-Haul, and collected records along with additional materials.

Eight days later, Short made the request to seal the search warrants and the request itself.

However, a ruling by Judge Mary Ann Brown made the request document accessible after it had been made confidential for a few days.

According to the request document, "Search warrants were issued which in part dealt with alleged sexual abuse by Ben Trane, the owner and administrator of Midwest Academy and involving a named prior student."

The document lists items seized from the facility by investigators including computers, cameras, cell phones and electronic items, as well as “items of trace evidence involving bodily fluids for DNA and related forensic examination.” Results from those items were sent to the state lab and likely will take several weeks to process.

“Credit cards were also seized to determine if those cards were used in connection with the purchase of items for female students,” according to the document.

DHS also reported that Midwest Academy may have billed parents for counseling and other services students confined in the OSS rooms may not have been receiving.

Short claims in the request that the involvement of the U.S. Attorney’s office and FBI could result in federal charges if after review there are grounds to proceed.

“Also under investigation on the state level are possible charges of sexual abuse, child pornography, child endangerment, fraudulent practices and ongoing criminal conduct,” according to the document.

A court hearing is set for 9 a.m. Friday, Feb. 26, to rule on the confidentiality of the search warrants.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/alleged-sexual-abuse-by-academy-owner-part-of-fbi-dci/article_3d119613-368d-59ea-8d40-3a3d60ef9a9b.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Sheriff: Midwest Academy needs oversight

- LEE ROOD Des Moines Register
- Feb 19, 2016
-

KEOKUK – The troubled teens taken to Midwest Academy often resorted to drastic measures – running away from the strict Southeast Iowa boarding school in crowds as large as 11, cutting themselves, assaulting staff members and other students, and attempting suicide on numerous occasions, sheriff’s reports released Wednesday show.

But most of those 73 reports over three years, released at the request of The Des Moines Register, involved incidents that were not criminal in nature. And often, the incidents were not reported by the staff or Director Ben Trane until several days after they occurred.

Lee County Sheriff Jim Sholl now says he believes that all boarding schools like Midwest should be required to have state oversight.

And a state legislator has introduced a bill to require licensing and oversight.

In some of the 73 incidents, law enforcement was notified only after Iowa’s Department of Human Services got involved, Sholl says.

“Whether they intended to do it or not, (academy staff) did a good job of keeping law enforcement, DHS and parents in the dark,” Sholl said.

Two sheriff’s reports also revealed that boys at the academy “rioted” on Jan. 29, after they were told they were being sent home or to shelters because of a criminal investigation. That probe began after two staff members alleged a student had been sexually assaulted by a staff member. One of the two staffers who contacted law enforcement was a mandatory reporter, holding a job where the law requires reporting suspicions of abuse.

Staff felt powerless

Because the academy was being shut down by the FBI and Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, staff members felt powerless to stop the roughly 40 boys from rebelling, the sheriff said.

Trane, owner and director of the school, has not responded to requests for interviews. Trane has said publicly he got his start at a Utah program affiliated with the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools. Roughly two dozen of those programs have been closed amid allegations of child abuse, according a July 2013 report in the New York Times.

But in an email to the Register, Trane said those programs and their problems have nothing to do with Midwest Academy.

Sholl said this week he was unaware of some conditions at the academy, especially the small isolation cells where youths said they were forced to stand for days on end with little food or water. Former students told the Register and other Iowa media they were kept there after misbehaving, with lights on at all hours to keep them awake.

“If we had rules and regulations governing facilities like this, I think you wouldn’t see the number of founded or unfounded DHS cases, and less law enforcement involvement,” Sholl said. “I don’t think it is a coincidence that they were located here in Iowa,” where such facilities aren’t regulated.

In a copyrighted story in Sunday’s Register, Sholl confirmed at least five reports of sexual offenses at the academy and at least 19 abuse reports that had been deemed founded by DHS, meaning most evidence suggested some type of abuse had occurred.

Not considered a School

The Department of Education told the Register the academy wasn’t considered a school under state regulations, in spite of online claims of national accreditation.

DHS officials have said repeatedly they had no licensing or oversight authority over the facility, but they did send copies of all child-abuse assessments conducted at the academy to the county attorney for review.

Bill introduced

State Sen. Herman Quirnbach, D-Ames, has drafted a bill in the Legislature, Senate Study Bill 3154, which would require such operations to be licensed as group foster care facilities with oversight from DHS. The bill would require the schools to report what they charge, undergo quarterly inspections and comply with rules adopted by the departments of human services, education and inspections and appeals.

In another development, Lee County Attorney Michael Short moved last week to seal all information relating to the search warrants executed in late January at the academy, including a 20-page affidavit he said outlined allegations and witnesses.

On Tuesday, The Des Moines Register and Tribune Co. filed a petition requesting the immediate release of that information, including an accounting of what was seized during the raids, which is typically public under Iowa law.

“The possibility that children were sexually, physically or emotionally abused at Midwest Academy — a self-described therapeutic boarding school over which the state appears to have little to no oversight — has resulted in broad public interest,” the petition said.

Judge will decide

District Court Judge Mary Ann Brown has said she will likely release the county attorney's motion to seal the search warrant information and the court order sealing the records by noon Thursday.

"I am not sure how the issue of whether (the) search warrant and its application should remain confidential can be litigated unless we analyze the Application to Seal and the Order entered sealing those documents," she wrote to attorneys in the case.

Brown is expected to hold a hearing Feb. 26 to decide whether to release the search warrant application and the return.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/sheriff-midwest-academy-needs-oversight/article_fc854b57-417b-56d4-b44b-0b350d2d8f29.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Midwest Academy owner a suspect in abuse case

- CINDY IUTZI MVM News Network
- Feb 22, 2016
-

KEOKUK – Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane is a suspect in the investigation of alleged sex abuse involving a student, according to recently released documents.

Information about recent raids at Midwest Academy and Midwest Treatment Center came to light through access to Lee County Attorney Michael Short's request that the court make search warrants used in the investigation be off limits to the public and news media.

In his request to seal the search warrants, Short reasons that minimizing exposure to news outlets prior to charges being filed would protect the investigation, Midwest Academy staff and students.

Short is concerned that releasing information early could color statements when potential witnesses are interviewed by investigating officers. Also, the alleged victim was a minor when the alleged abuse incident occurred.

Midwest Academy in Keokuk is a boarding/training school for troubled teens. Midwest Treatment Center in Montrose is a therapeutic treatment facility, ancillary to MWA.

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The January search resulted in about 90 students being sent home by the Department of Human Resources after the Department of Human Services assessed 19 of them for abuse or neglect as related to episodes of lengthy confinement in "out of school suspension" rooms.

That effectively shut down the school.

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Eight days later, Short made the request to seal the search warrants and the request itself.

However, a ruling by Judge Mary Ann Brown made the request document accessible after it had been made confidential for a short while.

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DHS also reported that Midwest Academy may have billed parents for counseling and other services students confined in the OSS rooms may not have been receiving.

Short claims in the request that the involvement of the U.S. Attorney’s office and FBI could result in federal charges if after review there are grounds to proceed.

“Also under investigation on the state level are possible charges of sexual abuse, child pornography, child endangerment, fraudulent practices and ongoing criminal conduct,” according to the document.

A court hearing is set for 9 a.m. Friday to rule on the confidentiality of the search warrants.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/midwest-academy-owner-a-suspect-in-abuse-case/article_102d7c14-5f93-521c-96bb-0f2912a8842c.html

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Accessed: 11/02/2017

Judge vows to render prompt decision on opening Midwest Academy records

- emma vanarsdale emmav@dailygate.com
- Feb 29, 2016



CAPTION: District Judge Mary Ann Brown listens to arguments from Lee County Attorney Mike Short and Des Moines Register Legal Representative Elita Walker on why search warrant information should remain sealed, or be unsealed for public viewing. Brown had not looked at the warrants prior to the hearing Friday and said she would look at them and make a decision “promptly.”

Lee County District Judge Mary Ann Brown said Friday she will “promptly” decide whether search warrants regarding the Midwest Academy alleged sexual abuse investigation will be made public.

“I haven’t laid eyes on it (search warrant),” Brown said.

She decided to look through the warrants and affidavits to decide to keep them sealed, or to unseal the records. Representatives from both sides didn't object.

The Des Moines Register filed a petition on Feb. 16 to have all records and search warrants unsealed, after Lee County Attorney Mike Short requested they be kept secret.

Short, Assistant Iowa Attorney General Denise Timmins and Des Moines Register Legal Representative Elita Walker were present for the hearing.

Ben Trane's lawyer, George Jones, was notified of the hearing, but was not present. Trane and Jones also have requested copies of the search warrants.

Public access to the records was restricted because of government interest in the investigation, according to a briefing from Friday's hearing. The documents describe the details of the case and individuals involved as witnesses, some of whom are minors.

According to the briefing, the investigation is complex and still in its initial stages. Brown said it could take several months to complete.

In addition to stating the possibility that witnesses could tailor their testimony to fit information gleaned from the warrants, the briefing noted that some employees of the academy who believe that the school could reopen, also believe that "if an employee is viewed as having cooperated with law enforcement, that individual will not be rehired."

The Des Moines Register claims the warrants and affidavits are presumed to be public because of the public's interest in the case. Brown said for the records to be presumptively public, a return has to be filed by law enforcement.

Short confirmed that as of 9 a.m. Friday a return to the warrant had not been filed. Filing for a return, which would detail what officers did in the scope of the warrant, would indicate the investigation is near complete.

Brown said the clerk's file on search warrants usually remains sealed until inventory is returned. Authorities filled a 26 foot U-haul with paper records from Midwest Academy on Feb. 11. Retrieving the records required a third search warrant. The first two were served on Jan. 28 at Midwest Academy and the Midwest Treatment Center in Montrose.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/judge-vows-to-render-prompt-decision-on-opening-midwest-academy/article_8435389e-4427-50ed-b38d-2e51145d8708.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Public's access to MWA search warrants at issue

- by Emma VanArsdale emmav@dailygate.com
- Feb 29, 2016
-



CAPTION: District Judge Mary Ann Brown (back) heard arguments from Lee County Attorney Mike Short and Des Moines Register Legal Rep. Elita Walker (front) during a hearing Friday to determine whether to keep search warrant records sealed or make them public during the Midwest Academy investigation.

Lee County District Judge Mary Ann Brown said Friday she will “promptly” decide whether search warrants regarding the Midwest Academy alleged sexual abuse investigation will be made public.

“I haven’t laid eyes on it (search warrant),” Brown said.

She will look through the warrants and affidavits to decide to keep them sealed, or to unseal the records. Representatives from both sides didn’t object.

The Des Moines Register filed a petition on Feb. 16 to have all records and search warrants unsealed, after Lee County Attorney Mike Short requested they be kept secret.

Short, Assistant Iowa Attorney General Denise Timmins and Des Moines Register Legal Representative Elita Walker were present for the hearing.

Ben Trane’s lawyer, George Jones, was notified of the hearing, but was not present. Trane and Jones also have requested copies of the search warrants.

Public access to the records was restricted because of government interest in the investigation, according to a briefing from on Friday’s hearing. The documents describe the details of the case and individuals involved as witnesses, some of whom are minors.

According to the briefing, the investigation is complex and still in its initial stages. Brown said it could take several months to complete.

In addition to stating the possibility that witnesses could tailor their testimony to fit information gleaned from the warrants, the briefing noted that some employees of the academy who believe that the school could reopen, also believe that “if an employee is viewed as having cooperated with law enforcement, that individual will not be rehired.”

The Des Moines Register claims the warrants and affidavits are presumed to be public because of the public’s interest in the case. Brown said for the records to be presumptively public, a return has to be filed by law enforcement.

Short confirmed that as of 9 a.m. Friday a return to the warrant had not been filed. Filing for a return, which would detail what officers did in the scope of the warrant, would indicate the investigation is near complete.

Brown said the clerk’s file on search warrants usually remained sealed until inventory is returned. Authorities filled a 26 foot U-haul with paper records from Midwest Academy on Feb. 11. Retrieving the records required a third search warrant. The first two were served on Jan. 28 at Midwest Academy and the Midwest Treatment Center in Montrose.

Walker argued that authorities have 10 days after serving a warrant to file a return of inventory.

According to Brown, Iowa State Code 808.5 issued in 1979 determines law enforcement has no time frame to file a return after serving a warrant. A code from 1977 states the 10 day rule, but has since been overruled.

Walker requested the judge demand a reasonable deadline for authorities to file the return.

“Sometimes returns are not filed in cases where no arrests are made,” Short said. “The return usually says ‘we found X, Y and Z.’”

Going through all of the files that were taken from the academy on Feb. 11 could take months.

“The witness list is no small thing,” he said. “There are hundreds of students and parents spread throughout the United States.”

“We want to conduct a proper investigation,” Timmins said.

“The charge we went in for may not be the charge we file,” Short said.

The first two search warrants were for alleged sexual abuse between a former student and employee, but since beginning the investigation, authorities have learned that students were held in out of school suspension rooms for many hours.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/public-s-access-to-mwa-search-warrants-at-issue/article_7e4729fe-69f0-550d-bb7f-f15cb47bea48.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Judge to keep warrants sealed

- Mar 1, 2016
-
- District Judge Mary Ann Brown has decided to keep search warrant applications and search warrants from the Midwest Academy case sealed until a return is filed by law enforcement.
- A document released today signed by Brown said the records will remain sealed until authorities have completed the investigation, which could take months.
- The warrants relate to searches at the school on Jan. 28 and 29, and Feb. 11 that resulted in its closure after 90 students were removed.
- The Des Moines Register filed a petition on Feb. 16 to have the warrants unsealed. Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane and his legal team also filed a similar petition. His also was declined.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/judge-to-keep-warrants-sealed/article_6874d7b7-d030-5fad-ae8e-aeb36feaa3fc.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Brown keeps Midwest Academy warrants sealed

- by Emma VanArsdale emmav@dailygate.com
- Mar 2, 2016
-

District Judge Mary Ann Brown has decided to keep search warrant applications and search warrants from the Midwest Academy case sealed following a hearing Friday.

A document released Tuesday by Brown at the South Lee County Courthouse in Keokuk said the records will remain sealed until authorities have completed the investigation, which could take months.

The warrants relate to searches at the school on Jan. 28 and 29, and Feb. 1 that resulted in its closure. The Department of Human Services removed all 90 students after executing the first of three search warrants.

Lee County Attorney Mike Short said a request to seal all records regarding Midwest Academy was made on Feb. 9. The court entered the order to seal all records the following day.

The Des Moines Register filed a petition to have the warrants unsealed on Feb. 16. Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane and his legal team filed a similar petition. Their petition also was declined.

On Feb. 18, the motion to seal and order to seal all documents were unsealed for public viewing, but the warrants remain undisclosed.

According to the court document, Iowa Code Section 808.13 states that all information filed with the court for the purpose of a search warrant will be kept confidential until law enforcement has executed the warrant and made a return.

Details in search warrant and search warrant applications can't be seen by any person other than law enforcement, judge and other court employees.

Des Moines Register Legal Representative Leita Walker argued that the documents should be made public. She also asked the court to establish a deadline to complete the investigation, which was denied.

Lee County Attorney Mike Short and Assistant Iowa Attorney General Denise Timmons requested that all Midwest Academy search warrants and documents remain sealed even after a return is filed. They also want the return be kept confidential. This also was denied by the court

because Brown ruled that the State of Iowa doesn't need to conceal the fact of an ongoing investigation, according to the document released Tuesday.

During Friday's hearing with Brown, Walker said the search warrants should be public because of interest in the case.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/brown-keeps-midwest-academy-warrants-sealed/article_af33e41d-bac1-593e-95db-1015389cc7b4.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Despite many complaints, agency couldn't regulate boarding school

- By Ryan J. Foley Associated Press
- Mar 4, 2016

IOWA CITY – Iowa Department of Education officials were aware since at least 2011 about allegations of mistreatment at a now-shuttered boarding school for troubled teenagers but believed they didn't have authority to act, records released Thursday show.

The department considered Midwest Academy in Keokuk an unregulated home school that wasn't subject to oversight, including rules that limit the use of detention and restraint of students, according to complaints and emails provided to The Associated Press under the open records law.

Abuse complaint Ruling

Department lawyer Thomas Mayes ruled in 2011 that the agency could not address a complaint alleging that a 15-year-old boy with autism had been improperly kept in seclusion, restrained and harshly disciplined due to his disability. He wrote that “no matter how desirable it might be” to extend its oversight to Midwest Academy, lawmakers had not given the department power to regulate non-accredited schools.

In 2012, a citizen called the department to ask why the academy was allowed to continue operating and to report rumors that students were being abused and humiliated. The department's deputy director Jeff Berger told colleagues that “this isn't our issue.”

“We don't accredit them and have no jurisdiction, so if there is alleged abuse, it will require someone there to report it to (Department of Human Services),” he wrote. “We have no stake on this.”

Communications issue

Department of Education official Barbara Byrd wrote that she was disturbed by that complaint because she thought the academy had closed after ending a relationship with Keokuk public schools years earlier. She said the department had previously received “a steady stream of questions and concerns from local citizens, parents, and families,” adding that, “It was a very uncomfortable, questionable situation.”

Berger said Thursday that state officials weren't aware of the full scope of the problems at Midwest Academy until recently. The department had talks with the school over a decade about whether it would become accredited, but its leaders refused to agree to follow state laws governing student safety and restraint, he said.

It therefore remained outside the reach of the department, which doesn't "intervene locally on abuse allegations," Berger said.

The records add detail about how Midwest Academy, a for-profit school that cost \$5,000 in monthly tuition, stayed in business despite mounting concerns. They were released hours after the Iowa Senate unanimously passed a bill to give the department and other state agencies more authority to oversee such facilities in the future.

The academy abruptly closed in January after state and federal agents descended on its campus to seize documents and interview many of its 100 students. Police are investigating allegations that academy owner Ben Trane sexually assaulted a 17-year-old former student. Trane hasn't responded to interview requests.

Investigators are also looking into whether academy leaders engaged in a pattern of child endangerment by putting students in small "isolation boxes" for days at a time, and whether parents were improperly billed for counseling services that weren't provided during the seclusion. Former students have told AP that confinement in those rooms prompted many to attempt suicide and haunted them for years.

Sen. Herman Quirmbach, D-Ames, said it's an open question whether agencies "exercised the authority that they had in a timely fashion." He said that "adverse reports" had swirled around the academy for years.

In 2013, the parent of a former student complained to the department that Trane retaliated against her for talking to other parents about concerns, including living conditions and untrained staff. She said Trane was refusing to provide a transcript showing the girl completed 8th grade, making it impossible for her to enroll in high school.

The parent wanted to know how to get the transcript and whether "you have had complaints about Midwest Academy in the past."

Mayes wrote that the situation "may be a violation of consumer law" but the department had no jurisdiction.

--

AP reporter Barbara Rodriguez contributed from Des Moines.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/despote-many-complaints-agency-couldn-t-regulate-boarding-school/article_7ef3648e-b196-514c-92a8-67c2d02fa6fa.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Student tells of her experience at Academy

- CINDY IUTZI MVM News Network
- Mar 4, 2016



KEOKUK – A petite 16-year-old Keokuk school girl with soulful brown eyes asked a couple of weeks ago to tell the story of her experience at Midwest Academy in Keokuk.

Her mother, Nikki Nagel, said her daughter, Kearra Scott, 16, was frustrated by the negative stories coming from former students of the self-described therapeutic boarding school, and wanted to offer her take on the organization.

Her stepfather, Devon Dade, was director of the facility for half of the time she attended. He had been an employee of MWA prior to his promotion.

Before the Academy

Kearra explained Monday the confusion and self-doubt that roiled her world prior to the 16 months she spent at Midwest Academy with other troubled teens.

She has been home since October 2015.

“I was sent there for self-harm, putting myself around the wrong crowd, sneaking out and drinking,” she said. “The day I went to Midwest I ran away from home.”

It was Sunday, June 1, 2014.

“I didn’t want to live at home and I didn’t want to go there,” she said. “I started working from the day I got there.”

Scott worked with a family representative and a personal counselor one-on-one.

“He (the counselor) helped me stay on track,” Scott said. “It wasn’t easy. Some things were unfair, but it wasn’t physical or sexual abuse. Some kids didn’t like the place so they would self-sabotage and seek the attention of staff to try to get them in trouble or fired. Staff took things the best way they could.”

Didn’t see advances

or abuse

Scott is not aware of staff making any improper advances during her time at MWA. She said that some of the staff were difficult to get along with, but there was no physical abuse. Scott said she did see students being restrained if they were being combative or aggressive.

She said she is aware that out-of-school suspension — otherwise known as OSS or intervention — had been more difficult before Dade became the academy director, although she had never served OSS.

After a while, Scott reached a level in the academy system that required her to monitor fellow students in OSS. She described the routine.

Lights were on so students could be watched and not self-harm, she said. Students were allowed use of the bathroom facilities.

Food served in OSS included oatmeal for breakfast, a piece of the fruit-of-the-day, orange juice, a piece of toast and some yogurt. Lunch was either a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or meat sandwich, a salad, milk, a piece of fruit and a type of vegetable. Dinner was the same as lunch plus two cups of rice and cheese. The student’s water bottle could be refilled any time of the day, she said.

The most common reasons for OSS/intervention were self-harming, trying to harm someone else, or being defiant.

Some Students would harm themselves

“Girls would do something to themselves so they didn’t have to be at the academy anymore,” Scott said.

In order to get out of OSS, students had to write a 1,000-word essay about their behavior, why they were in OSS or ways they could boost their confidence.

The disciplinary step before OSS was in-school-suspension, which occurred in a different room from OSS, according to Scott.

She said students had to sit on a chair “in structure” (putting their hands on the table), to regain points they’d lost by doing something wrong. While sitting there, the student had to listen to self-help tapes. If students wanted to get rid of more demerits, they could chose super-structure (hands on the table and feet together) to earn double points.

“Super-structure was always a choice, never forced,” Scott said.

Students corrected

other students

The academy worked on a level system with 1, 2 and 3 the lower levels, and 4, 5 and 6 upper levels. Upper-level students would correct lower-level students and could give them consequences for their actions, Scott said.

“It’s an honor to be in a higher level,” she said. “You get more privileges.”

Scott said students in the upper levels had more responsibility and were on their own more. They were allowed to make their own decisions – balancing out chores, studying, free time and staying consistent.

They were organized in families of 25 with two to three staff members per family.

everything as a family

“You do everything with your family, eat, gym, recreation time, chores, prepping for the day, bathroom breaks.” Scott said. “When the place loosened up more (when Dade became director) we got more rec time. Rules were definitely in force, but it was a lot less stressful and a lot less structured. You had time to think, listen to music, color, and find your own coping skills.”

Dade didn’t make things any easier on her, Scott said.

“If I was trying to fake any steps of the program he would push me harder because he knew I could do better than that,” Scott said. “He pushed me to the breaking point.”

After Scott returned home, she was in MWA’s after-program, going to the school every day because she couldn’t be left alone at home, she said.

Day of the search

The day the first of two search warrants was served at the academy, Jan. 28, she was on her way there.

The deputy guarding the driveway entrance allowed her to enter.

“The day they had the search warrants, I was escorted to a room with the others,” Scott said. “I didn’t know what was going on. It worried me at first, and I thought about my dad. He was passionate about the place.”

A female officer she believes was with the Division of Criminal Investigation asked to interview Scott. Scott was feeling emotional.

“A lot of girls were upset,” she said. “I was fully open with it, but I was scared I would say things out of anger. They were very, very intimidating. They asked about Ben (Trane) and Dad. Ben is like a second father-figure. He’s a very compassionate person. Layani (Trane’s wife) is bubbly, down-to-earth, and has a big heart.”

One of the big differences Scott sees in herself after experiencing MWA, besides having more confidence, is that she no longer needs to escalate an argument with her mom.

She finds it easier to confront issues with her dad, and listen to his advice, but is able to be friends with her mom.

Another student’s story will be in Monday’s Daily Democrat.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/student-tells-of-her-experience-at-academy/article_4ce2bf8a-5603-508f-aa94-ac5fc3e038b3.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Students, parents file suit against Midwest Academy

- Cindy Iutzi MVM News Network
- Mar 15, 2016
-
- Midwest Academy of Keokuk and its other manifestations are the subject of a lawsuit filed Monday at the South Lee County Courthouse by six former students and seven of their parents.
- The 13 plaintiffs in the lawsuit claim the boarding school maintained an “illegal environment” and “culture of punishment, confinement, coercion and physical confrontation and violence,” including sexual abuse and harassment.
- They are represented by attorneys David Ferleger of Jenkintown, Pa., and Curtis Dial of Keokuk.
- Midwest Academy LLC, Midwest Twister LLC, Midwest Academy Treatment LLC, Midwest Academy Scholarship Fund and owner-director Benjamin Trane are listed as defendants.
- The former students and the time they spent at Midwest Academy include:
- Grace Ferguson Hunt – June 24, 2014 to July 9, 2015.
- Kodi Dick – Oct. 18, 2014 to Sept. 28, 2015.
- Roger Palinsky – February 2014 to November 2014.
- Eliza Meyer – June 29, 2014 to May 26, 2015.
- Radhi Chouraier – November 2010 to March 2012.
- Z.D., a minor – from Nov. 4, 2013, to Nov. 5, 2014.
- The lawsuit claims the former students were kept “in 6-by-8-foot filthy isolation boxes on a starvation diet, (and) forced to sit in specific postures in the bare box,” according to the lawsuit. The duration of some children’s stay in the so-called “out of school suspension” isolation rooms is described in the lawsuit as “for days and weeks at a time.”
- “The plaintiff students, whose stays in the residential special school for troubled youth encompassed a time period of 37 months, describe a litany of abuse and mistreatment including beatings, ignored pleas for medical attention, forced silence, inadequate and untrained staff, sex between students and staff, and sex among students,” Ferleger said.
- The lawsuit seeks compensatory and punitive damages for what Ferleger and Dial call “‘shocking callousness’ of the defendants which showed ‘willful and wanton disregard for the rights and safety of the vulnerable students.’”
- Midwest Academy was raided Jan. 28 and Jan. 29 by the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Human Services, Iowa State Patrol and the Lee County Sheriff’s Office. DHS conducted interviews of the almost 90 students who were at MWA at the time. Parents were given 24 hours to pick up their children. If some of the students were not retrieved, they would be put under DHS care. No further information has been given by DHS. No charges have been filed in connection with the investigation.

- Alleged mistreatment
- A few of the several examples of alleged mistreatment cited in the lawsuit include:
- “Students are used by staff to assist in physically restrain(ing) and subdue(ing) other children. Kodi Dick witnessed other student assaulted, being thrown to the ground, elbowed in the back of the neck and abused. A staff person commanded Kodi to assist in taking down the student and then the staff person dropped his weight on the student ... The student’s head and face were injured ... he was taken to the segregation box.”
- When the student demanded to talk to the DHS about the incident, he allegedly was not allowed to call until his head wounds had healed.
- Radhi Chaukaier has Crohn’s Disease, but even though MWA assured his mother he would have proper medical care, “repeated requests for medical attention ... were ignored by Midwest until he was at the point, totally in pain and in fever, that he could not function. Radhi was left without medication for days at a time.”
- Elijah Meyer was the subject of abuse reports to DHS on April 14, 2015, and May 8, 2015, that said he was “being victimized regarding sexual acts between Midwest Academy students. The allegations involved multiple children. Midwest Academy failed to separate the children involved from one another, including Elijah during the weeks between the abuse reports.”
- Ferleger and Dial said “DHS Child Protective Services concluded on Aug. 6, 2015, the abuse allegations were founded for denial of critical care, for failure to provide proper supervision,” and alleged that Ben Trane was the perpetrator and would be placed on the registry for child abusers.
- The finding is on appeal by Trane, according to Ferleger and Dial.
- It also is alleged in the lawsuit that Trane took Meyer out to lunch the day after his DHS interview and offered to buy Meyer items in order to interfere with the investigation.
- Z.D. was age 13 when he was picked up at the airport by Trane. He was placed in the “OSS segregation box approximately 25 to 30 times, including one time for six days in the box ... While already in the secure box, he once made a comment about ‘running.’ That comment prompted two staff to enter and restrain him to the floor, holding him down for 45 minutes. (Due to the cement floor) Z.D. was bloodied up by their actions. Midwest jeopardized Z.D.’s health. During his year at Midwest, he lost more than 40 pounds.”
- Parents claim they were given information by Midwest Academy that the school was accredited, which they allege it is not; they paid for their child’s therapy, which they allege was not received; were told about the practices and conditions of MWA, which they allege were misinformation; were told medication would be administered, but allege it often was delayed or administered by untrained personnel; were told their child’s special education needs in light of disabilities would be met, but allege they were not.
- The lawsuit makes 14 claims against Midwest and others and requests compensation: fraud; negligent misrepresentation; false imprisonment; battery; assault; negligence; educational malpractice; intentional infliction of emotional distress; negligent hiring; supervision and retention; responsibility of owners for employees’ misdeeds; violation of the Iowa Private Rights of Action for Consumer Fraud Act; punitive and exemplary damages regarding actions and lack of actions toward children in their care; and violating parents’ rights regarding their children.

- In addition to a judgment against Midwest Academy and others for monetary compensation related to the 14 claims, the lawsuit asks for payment of attorneys' fees and all court costs.
- Ben Trane's attorney George Jones, who represents him in a related lawsuit filed earlier in March by former employee Cheyenne Jerred, would not comment on who might be representing Trane and others in this action.
- "There is nothing I can confirm," Jones said. "I can neither confirm or deny that."

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/students-parents-file-suit-against-midwest-academy/article_1e36defc-8a24-527a-bb6e-1b4311cd85ed.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Lawsuits pile up at MWA

- By Cindy Iutzi dgceditor@dailygate.com
- Mar 16, 2016
-
- An attorney for 13 people suing Midwest Academy of Keokuk and its other manifestations, believes the treatment his clients received at the school for troubled teens is disturbing for its reliance on a system of fear, punishment and violence.
- “Every child witnessed action taken against other students and was placed in fear of similar victimization,” said Attorney David Ferleger of Jenkintown, Pa.
- He, along with Curtis Dial of Keokuk, filed a lawsuit Monday at the South Lee County Courthouse on behalf of six former students and seven of their parents against Midwest Academy LLC, Midwest Twister LLC, Midwest Academy Treatment LLC, Midwest Academy Scholarship Fund and owner-director Benjamin Trane.
- The lawsuit claims the boarding school maintained an “illegal environment” and “culture of punishment, confinement, coercion and physical confrontation and violence,” including sexual abuse and harassment.
- Ferleger said Midwest Academy took advantage of desperate parents, told them what they wanted to hear and then preceded to isolate their children and institute a dehumanizing and “harsh indoctrination system” designed to break their children’s will.
- Parents were told children would lie and manipulate in order to get home again.
- Students were told their parents would not believe them, Ferleger said.
- Among the cases he has taken to court, this stands with some of the worst.
- “Not including the rape or death of a handicapped individual, this is the most extreme situation I have dealt with in 40 years,” he said.
- Former students
- The former students and the time they spent at Midwest Academy include:
- Grace Ferguson Hunt – June 24, 2014 to July 9, 2015.
- Kodi Dick – Oct. 18, 2014 to Sept. 28, 2015.
- Roger Palinsky – February 2014 to November 2014.
- Eliza Meyer – June 29, 2014 to May 26, 2015.
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- “The plaintiff students, whose stays in the residential special school for troubled youth encompassed a time period of 37 months, describe a litany of abuse and mistreatment including beatings, ignored pleas for medical attention, forced silence, inadequate and untrained staff, sex between students and staff, and sex among students,” Ferleger said.
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Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/lawsuits-pile-up-at-mwa/article_2949e5f1-9f33-57dc-8bfd-70fc4c6d660d.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

Jerred awarded nearly \$750K for Midwest Academy firing

- Lauren Zechin, dgczechin@dailygate.com
- May 10, 2017

A judge has awarded \$748,800 in damages to a woman who reported what she thought was abuse of a student at a Keokuk boarding school for troubled youths.

According to the Associated Press, the award for 22-year-old Cheyenne Jerred was announced Monday by District Court Judge John Wright.

Jerred filed her whistleblower lawsuit against Midwest Academy in December 2015, saying she'd been fired because she'd reported the incident to the Iowa Human Resources Department. Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies subsequently executed search warrants at two Midwest Academy locations in Lee County. The academy closed shortly afterward.

Jerred's attorney, Curtis Dial of Keokuk, was pleased with the judge's decision.

"I'm very happy – the amount was about the maximum we could've gotten," he said. "I know Cheyenne's very happy."

Midwest Academy was not able to have a trial "because it couldn't afford an attorney," Ben Trane stated in an email Tuesday.

"Midwest Academy is a dead company with no assets," he said. "The facts of the case are these for the readers to decide. Ms. Jerrod was fired for endangering students for not reporting an alleged sexual assault and after being written up did it again, and only reported it after the school clinical director found out and called her in to confirm the allegation.

"He found out she reported it 20 minutes earlier in the parking lot because she thought she would be fired for her inappropriate actions. When he called in the allegation, he was told it had just been reported."

Trane said Midwest Academy followed procedure and called in the allegation "within 10 minutes of getting the information."

"Ms. Jerrod was trained again on abuse reporting procedure and was given a second chance," he said. "Ms. Jerrod then went back and started endangering students the next week for which she was terminated.

"Those are the facts; it is sad in our legal system that people who endanger underage students get awarded because there could be no trial. It is not about right and wrong or justice but who can afford to play the legal game. It is very sad and disturbing."

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/jerred-awarded-nearly-k-for-midwest-academy-firing/article_072970b6-b692-52b9-9061-c12dfd00788a.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

\$748,800 awarded in whistleblower suit

- lauren zechin Mississippi Valley Publishing
- May 10, 2017
-



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Jerred filed her whistleblower lawsuit against Midwest Academy in December 2015, saying she'd been fired because she'd reported the incident to the Iowa Human Resources Department. Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies subsequently executed search warrants at two Midwest Academy locations in Lee County. The academy closed shortly afterward.

Jerred's attorney, Curtis Dial of Keokuk, was pleased with the judge's decision.

"I'm very happy – the amount was about the maximum we could've gotten," he said. "I know Cheyenne's very happy."

Midwest Academy was not able to have a trial "because it couldn't afford an attorney," Ben Trane stated in an email Tuesday.

"Midwest Academy is a dead company with no assets," he said. "The facts of the case are these for the readers to decide. Ms. Jerrod was fired for endangering students for not reporting an alleged sexual assault and after being written up did it again, and only reported it after the school clinical director found out and called her in to confirm the allegation.

"He found out she reported it 20 minutes earlier in the parking lot because she thought she would be fired for her inappropriate actions. When he called in the allegation, he was told it had just been reported."

Trane said Midwest Academy followed procedure and called in the allegation "within 10 minutes of getting the information."

"Ms. Jerrod was trained again on abuse reporting procedure and was given a second chance," he said. "Ms. Jerrod then went back and started endangering students the next week for which she was terminated.

"Those are the facts; it is sad in our legal system that people who endanger underage students get awarded because there could be no trial. It is not about right and wrong or justice but who can afford to play the legal game. It is very sad and disturbing."

Associated Press contributed to this article.

Source: https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_democrat/news/awarded-in-whistleblower-suit/article_0349c145-eef2-5505-978b-fa3d487713a3.html

Accessed: 11/02/2017

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/readers-watchdog/2017/04/15/parents-abused-midwest-academy-students-pursue-founder/100468622/>

Parents of abused Midwest Academy students pursue founder

[Lee Rood](#), lrood@dmreg.com Published 9:34 a.m. CT April 15, 2017

Midwest Academy and the criminal shadow over boarding schools nationally

The families suing the shuttered Midwest Academy school for troubled children near Keokuk want a judge to hold liable the prominent Utah businessman responsible for opening it and other schools like it around the world.

But an attorney for Robert Browning Lichfield, who was instrumental in opening up scores of schools later found to be abusive toward children, has argued Lichfield only acted as a landlord for Midwest Academy.

For 16 months, state and federal authorities have been investigating [widespread criminal allegations](#) at the boarding school. The civil lawsuit filed by former students and parents has been delayed because the school's records were seized by state and federal authorities in raids in January 2016.

One lawyer in the case said in a court affidavit that he was told the records are not expected to be returned for months.

A Lee County judge will hear arguments Monday about what to do next in the civil case. Ben Trane, the former owner of the school who [faces allegations of sexual abuse and fraud](#), is scheduled to appear by telephone.

"The other side has been trying to figure how to get to the records," said W. Tyler Logan, a Keokuk attorney for Lichfield's limited liability corporation, Midwest Twister. "It's been hard to move along without them."

The civil lawsuit names Midwest Academy, Midwest Twister and Trane, among others. At the center of arguments between lawyers is whether Midwest Twister, which owns the Midwest property, can be sued as part of the case.

Lichfield, his family members and associates created the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools, also known as WWASPS, decades ago.

WWASPS developed into a multimillion-dollar industry and referred families to residential facilities owned or run by Lichfield's relatives and business associates. It also reaped

payments for referrals, billing and marketing, according to past court cases and documents.

In 2003, Lichfield bought the old Lee County Home near Keokuk for \$500,000 to transform it into Midwest Academy.

An unusual 20-year lease agreement between Midwest Twister, which Lichfield managed, and Trane shows lease payments hinged on how many students were enrolled at the academy.

In 2006, however, Midwest Twister secured a \$3.5 million mortgage on the land. Logan would not say Friday why Midwest obtained that mortgage.

Since the January 2016 raids, no property taxes on the land have been paid.

Iowa's Department of Human Services found Trane responsible for child abuse in 2015 for failing to properly supervise children who were sexually abused while in his facility's care. Child-protective workers and the FBI investigated after the allegations in April and May 2015.

The school was raided months later after employees reported the alleged sexual abuse of a former student. Trane was named in court documents as the suspect.

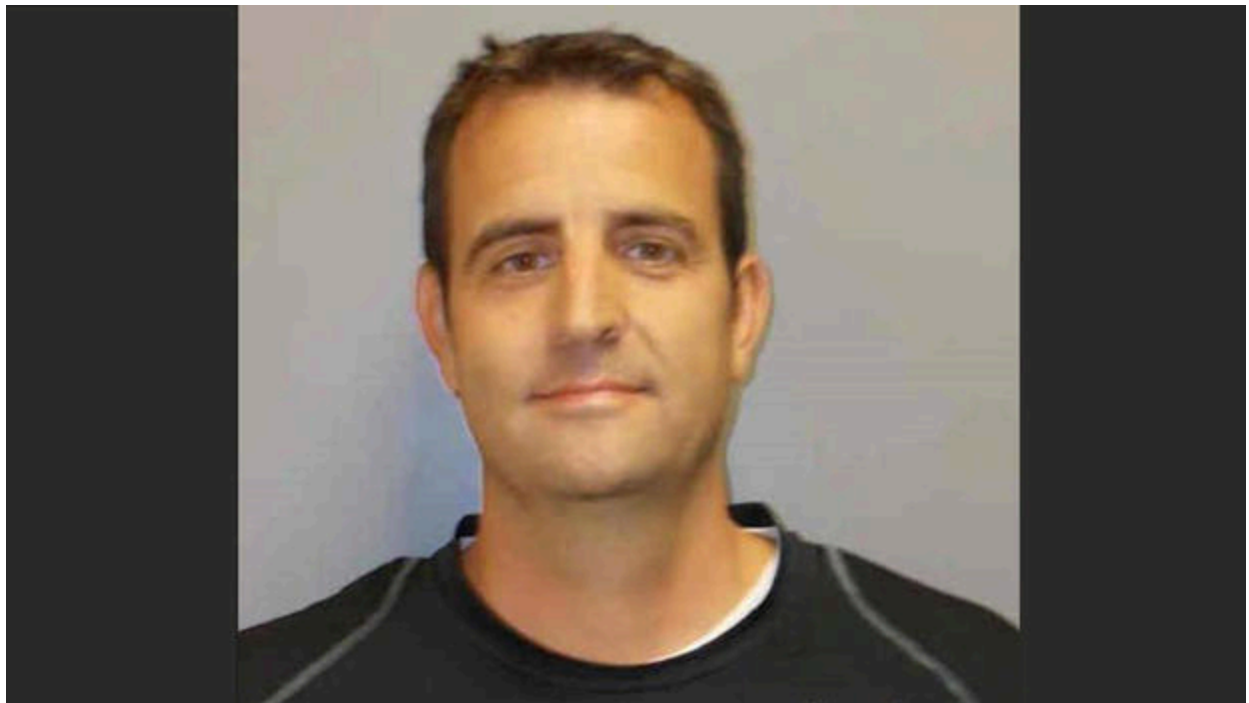
One former employee, Cheyenne Jerred, won a default judgment in a civil lawsuit after she said she was wrongfully fired. A hearing to discuss damages has been scheduled for May 8.

The other civil lawsuit naming several former students alleges fraud, negligent misrepresentation, false imprisonment, battery, assault, negligence, educational malpractice, intentional infliction of emotional distress, negligent hiring and violations of Iowa's Consumer Fraud Act.

The defendants are seeking a judgment "in an amount which will fully and fairly compensate them for the damages suffered," according to the lawsuit.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/benjamin-trane-midwest-academy-boarding-school-owner-charged-sexual-abuse-iowa/>

Iowa boarding school owner charged with sexually abusing teenage students



Former Midwest Academy boarding school owner Ben Trane is shown in a Sept. 6, 2017 booking photo.

- Email
IOWA CITY, Iowa -- The owner of an Iowa boarding school for teenagers coerced one female student into a sexual relationship, had others undress during "body image therapy" sessions and kept classmates in solitary confinement for long stretches, prosecutors alleged Friday.

Former Midwest Academy owner and director Benjamin Trane, 39, is charged with third-degree sexual abuse, sexual exploitation by a counselor and child endangerment. He turned himself in Thursday at the Lee County Jail to face warrants that were issued for his arrest last week.

The charges were filed after a 19-month investigation into allegations of abuse at the private, for-profit boarding school in Keokuk, in Iowa's southeastern corner. The school, which enrolled about 100 students from mostly well-off families across the United States, closed in January 2016 after investigators served search warrants there.

In criminal complaints released Friday, Division of Criminal Investigation special agent Joe Lestina alleged that Trane abused his power to pursue sexual relationships with some students while enforcing policies that put others at risk by keeping them in isolation for days or weeks at a time.

Trane performed multiple sexual acts on one student throughout 2015, coercing her to engage in them "in order for her to successfully participate and 'level up' in the program and to be able to contact her family members," Lestina wrote. Trane was the girl's counselor and point of contact for her family.

Trane also held individual and group counseling sessions with female students that included "body image therapy," in which they would undress and stand in front of a mirror to discuss aspects of their bodies, the complaint said. Trane engaged in sexually explicit conversations with the students and physical contact with some of them, all "for the purpose of sexual arousal, gratification and attempted grooming," Lestina wrote.

Trane enforced policies and oversaw a harsh school environment "which created a substantial risk to the students' physical, mental or emotional health and/or safety, including but not limited to solitary confinement for extended periods of time," he wrote. Former students have told The Associated Press that they were forced to stay in small concrete "isolation boxes" for days or weeks and that staff wouldn't let them out unless they sat in a specific posture for 24 hours.

The charges carry a total maximum punishment of 12 years behind bars.

Trane had been living in Idaho Falls, Idaho, since the school's closure and listed his occupation as unemployed in court documents. His cell phone rang unanswered and it wasn't clear if he had an attorney.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/midwest/ct-iowa-boarding-school-abuse-20170908-story.html>

Iowa boarding school owner charged with abusing teenage students

Investigators say the former owner of an Iowa boarding school used his position to coerce one teenager into a sexual relationship and others to undress for his arousal.

Former Midwest Academy owner Benjamin Trane is charged with third-degree sexual abuse, sexual exploitation by a counselor and child endangerment.

He turned himself in Thursday after a 19-month investigation into abuse allegations at the private, for-profit boarding school Trane operated in Keokuk. The school, which had about 100 students from mostly well-off families, closed in January 2016.

Investigators allege that Trane coerced one student to engage in sex acts in order to advance in the program and be allowed to contact relatives. Trane also allegedly had others undress for "body image therapy" sessions he led, and kept students in isolation for extended periods.

<http://www.wgem.com/story/36316956/2017/09/Thursday/former-midwest-academy-owner-arrested>

Former Midwest Academy owner arrested

[20](#)

By Gene Kennedy, Anchor

CONNECT

Posted: Sep 07, 2017 8:32 PM CDT

Former Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane spoke at a press conference in February 2016 after authorities raided the campus following sex abuse allegations.

Lee County Sheriff Stacy Weber confirmed Thursday night that former Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane turned himself in and is now in the Lee County Jail on three felony charges.

Weber said Trane made the decision after learning there were warrants for his arrest. A Lee County dispatcher said the charges included sexual abuse against a victim's will, a 3rd degree felony. Dispatchers said Trane is also charged with child endangerment and sex exploit therapist pattern.

Authorities said he was in the Lee County Jail on a \$500,000 cash-only bond Thursday night.

Trane is the former owner of Midwest Academy in Keokuk, which has been [closed since early 2016](#). Authorities raided the campus January 28, 2016 as part of an investigation into allegations of sexual abuse involving a staff member and a former student.

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/2016/03/14/lawsuit-targets-midwest-academy-owner/81734960/>

Lawsuit targets Midwest Academy, owner

[Lee Rood](#), lrood@dmreg.com Published 5:30 p.m. CT March 14, 2016 | Updated 8:55 a.m. CT March 15, 2016



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(Photo: Lee Rood/The Register)

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Editor's note: This story has been adjusted from its original publication to correct the spelling of David Ferleger's last name.

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Iowa's Department of Human Services found Midwest Academy owner Benjamin Trane responsible for child abuse last year for failing to properly supervise children who were sexually abused while in his facility's care, according to a lawsuit filed Monday on behalf of six former students and several parents.

DHS and the FBI investigated after allegations involving several children were made in April and May 2015. One former student said after he was interviewed about the sex abuse by a DHS child protection worker, Trane took him to lunch, offered to buy him books and said "I can make sure you get things," the lawsuit says.

"This was an effort by Benjamin Trane to interfere with the FBI and State of Iowa investigation," the lawsuit alleges.

The lawsuit accuses the boarding school near Keokuk and Montrose of fraud, negligent misrepresentation, false imprisonment, battery, assault, negligence, educational malpractice, intentional infliction of emotional distress, negligent hiring and violations of Iowa's Consumer Fraud Act. The defendants are seeking a judgment "in an amount which will fully and fairly compensate them for the damages suffered," according to the lawsuit.

PREVIOUS:

- [Boys Town becomes national advocate for residential care](#)
- [Midwest Academy highlights child welfare worries](#)

Midwest Academy, a tough-love school for troubled youths in far southeast Iowa, [was raided in late January](#) by state and federal investigators. Trane has not commented publicly on the criminal probe. Trane's lawyer, George Jones, did not return a call Monday seeking comment on the lawsuit. Claims made in a lawsuit are not evidence and only represent one side of the story.

Caregivers of children can be found responsible for a kind of abuse called "[denial of critical care](#)" when they fail to properly supervise children who come into harm's way. The lawsuit says Trane was placed on the state's central child abuse registry as a result of the DHS finding. Trane appealed that decision, but the outcome is unknown. The registry and appeals are generally confidential under Iowa law.

(Photo: Special to the Register)

The lawsuit was filed by Pennsylvania civil rights lawyer David Ferleger and Curtis Dial, a Keokuk attorney representing former Midwest Academy employee Cheyenne Jerred. She has alleged in her own civil suit against Midwest Academy that she was wrongfully fired after reporting the sex abuse and sexual harassment of a former student. The lawyers are planning a 2 p.m. press conference Tuesday at the Baymont Inn in Keokuk to discuss the allegations.

"This is not a vast conspiracy among children who are lying," Ferleger said. "There is truth among their stories. The way they were treated was like something a couple centuries ago. It was as if out of 'Oliver Twist.'"

Ferleger says he's heard the stories of youths and parents who reported benefits from Midwest's programming. "I don't think so, but even if that is so — the barbaric use of concrete boxes to confine kids, the beatings, the rats scurrying in the ceilings and the humiliation people suffered — none of that has any justification at all," he said.

School officials, the lawsuit says, maintained an illegal and dehumanizing culture of "punishment, confinement, coercion, physical confrontation and violence" that sought to break the will of children in its care.

Midwest Academy also is accused in the lawsuit of misleading parents about the widespread use of segregation "boxes," false claims of being an accredited education program tied to the local high school; and billing for therapy and other treatments that were never provided.

In the lawsuit, students recount allegations of a rape in the shower, a female staff member having sex with a student, male students being sexually assaulted by other male students, and a staff member with a criminal record acting as a counselor without proper training. One of the plaintiffs said he lost 40 pounds because he was underfed. Others recounted being told to sit absolutely still for 19 hours a day in the out-of-school suspension, or isolation, rooms, until a mattress was provided at night.

The lawsuit also alleges Trane instructed female students in a "body image" class to enter a uniform room, undress in front of two mirrors and come out and describe to him their body type.

The lawsuit names as plaintiffs former students Grace Ferguson Hunt, Kodi Dick, Roger Palinsky, Elijah Meyer, Radhi Choukaier and a minor identified as Z.D. All attended Midwest within the past five years. Also named are parents Aaron Dick, Maria Adelaida Brown, Michelle Palinsky, Matthew and Cheryl Meyer, Eli Petrova Choukaier and Jenna Devereaux.

The lawsuit names as defendants Trane, Midwest Academy, Midwest Twister, Midwest Academy Treatment and the Midwest Academy Scholarship Fund.

Nineteen abuse reports had been confirmed at the academy prior to the January raids, according to the Lee County sheriff. Twenty-eight investigations were conducted when the

raids happened. At least five sex abuse reports were made over the past three years, among 80 calls from Midwest Academy to the sheriff.

Among other allegations:

- Kodi Dick alleged he was sexually harassed by other students and disciplined when he complained.
- Roger Palinsky said he had special education needs that were not addressed by boarding school employees, which kept him from advancing in the program.
- Radhi Choukaier, who had Crohn's disease, alleged he was forced to exercise two hours a day, resulting in bruising, fever and an eventual trip to the emergency room. When his mother pulled him out of the facility, the school refused to refund his \$46,000 annual tuition, despite having guaranteed refunds for medical reasons.

Ferleger noted in a news release that conditions in such boarding schools have gained national attention, following two reports by the Government Accountability Office in Washington, D.C., highlighting deaths, abuse and deceptive marketing

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/2016/02/18/documents-midwest-academy-owner-sex-abuse-suspect/80577232/>

Documents: Midwest Academy owner is sex abuse suspect

[Lee Rood](#), lrood@dmreg.com Published 5:33 p.m. CT Feb. 18, 2016 | Updated 6:18 a.m. CT Feb. 19, 2016

(Photo: Special to the Register)

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Ben Trane, the director and owner of Midwest Academy, is a suspect in the sex abuse investigation involving a 17-year-old student who attended the tough-love school for troubled youths, court records released Thursday show.

Trane, 37, has no criminal record in Iowa. He has not responded to multiple requests for interviews by The Des Moines Register since the 13-year-old southeast Iowa boarding school closed last month.

A motion to seal search warrant documents was released Thursday showing that computers, cameras, cellphones and other electronic items were seized during the raid of the boarding school Jan. 28-29 at locations in Keokuk and Montrose.

"Also seized were items of trace evidence involving bodily fluids for DNA and related forensic examination," the request to seal says.

Lee County Attorney Michael P. Short argued in the request to seal documents that it would be harmful to investigators, staff and students at the school to release details contained in the affidavits used to obtain the search warrants.

MORE: [DHS chief: Midwest Academy used outdated methods](#)

District Associate Judge Gary Noneman signed an order Feb. 10 in the case, State v. Trane, to seal those documents. But the Register & Tribune Co. filed a petition this week asking that the search warrant documents be released, citing the First Amendment and high public interest in the criminal investigation.

District Court Judge Mary Ann Brown on Thursday released Short's motion to seal and Noneman's order. She had already told lawyers in the case that a final decision could not be made about whether to release search warrant details without Short's request being made public.

The documents released Thursday did not include the name of the student Trane is suspected of abusing. But it did say credit cards were also seized at the academy "to determine if those cards were used in connection with the purchase of items for female students."

The request also cited "allegations of a pattern of child endangerment" in the use of the school's isolation rooms. Records regarding the so-called OSS rooms, used for "protracted separation and detention of students," were also sought.

EARLIER: [80 sheriff calls in 3 years to school](#) | [Sheriff says academy needs oversight](#)

Twenty-eight students were assessed by child-abuse investigators during the two-day raid.

Also under investigation: whether students held in seclusion rooms were billed for counseling and other services not provided while they were detained. The motion to seal also alleged "a willful failure to provide the services required" by special-needs students who had individualized educational plans.

"Charges are under review, pending the completion of the investigation on the federal level as a result of the involvement of the FBI and the United States Attorney's Office," Short wrote in his motion to seal the search warrant. "Also under investigation on the state level are possible charges of sexual abuse, child pornography, child endangerment, fraudulent practices, and ongoing criminal conduct."

The request noted that a large number of potential witnesses had yet to be interviewed, including former students and staff.

EDITORIALS: [Who is looking out for these kids?](#) | [Who is behind Midwest Academy?](#)

The raid on Midwest Academy occurred after the accusation of sexual abuse was reported to Iowa's Department of Human Services. Two staff members, one a mandatory child abuse reporter by law, made the report to authorities.

Since then, youths from across the country who attended the school have been sent home to parents or shelters. About 60 staff members were laid off.

The investigation is likely to continue for several months

<http://www.wgem.com/story/31154539/2016/02/Friday/midwest-academy-officially-closed-after-sexual-abuse-allegations>

Midwest Academy officially closed after sexual abuse allegations

○

Posted: Feb 05, 2016 7:14 PM CST



Ben Trane, owner of Midwest Academy, speaks at a press conference Friday.

- **WGEM LINKS**
 - ***Midwest Academy owner says students removed from facility***
 - ***Former students, staff speak out after Midwest Academy closes for good***
- KEOKUK, Ia. (WGEM) -

The owner of Midwest Academy in Keokuk is speaking out one week after authorities raided the campus, acting on allegations of sexual abuse involving a staff member and a former student.

Midwest Academy in Keokuk is officially closed.

"We are sad to announce that we had to lay off our final 60 employees at the school," owner Ben Trane said.

Trane held a press conference Friday night at the now vacant campus, a week after the Department of Human Services gave parents 24 hours to pick up their kids.

"On Thursday, January 28, 2016, Midwest Academy and the Midwest Treatment Centers experienced a large search by numerous branches of law enforcement," Trane said.

The Iowa Department of Public Safety stated that search warrants were issued after an investigation into sexual abuse involving a staff member and a former student. Former employee Cheyenne Jerred says she knew of the abuse back in November and was fired in December, a day after filing a report.

Trane removed our mic immediately after his prepared statement, and when asked for comment about the employee's wrongful discharge lawsuit, he said, "nope not at this time."

No further details about the case have been released by state officials.

WGEM is set to speak with Jerred's lawyer on Monday

<http://www.thehawkeye.com/5567c314-803d-57e9-893f-bd0a0739e9a0.html>

Local lawyer involved In Midwest Academy lawsuit seeks to withdraw from case

By Andy Hoffman

Posted Apr 17, 2016 at 12:01 AM Updated Apr 17, 2016 at 3:30 AM

KEOKUK -- An area attorney who is co-counsel in a civil lawsuit against Midwest Academy, wants permission to withdraw from the case.

Curtis Dial of Keokuk filed the motion Friday in South Lee County District, saying he no longer wants to work with David Ferleger, a Philadelphia attorney who sued the private boarding school last month on behalf of six former students and their parents. Dial said he has informed Ferleger of his decision.

"I informed him he should find other counsel to serve as local counsel," he said. "No substitute has entered an appearance as yet."

Dial said Friday his decision is not intended as a reflection of the validity of Ferleger's lawsuit.

"I just think we have different opinions on how to proceed with the case," he said, declining to elaborate.

Ferleger is not licensed to practice law in Iowa and, under state law, must have an attorney admitted to the Iowa bar to work with him. If he cannot find a lawyer, the case must be dismissed, court officials said.

Attempts to reach Ferleger Friday were unsuccessful.

A hearing on Dial's request will go before District Judge John Wright within the next few weeks. Wright will decide if Dial has grounds to withdraw from the suit he filed March 15. Until a decision is made on Dial's request, the case will remain on file, but no action will be taken.

A hearing on the matter has not been set.

Defendants in the lawsuit, Benjamin Trane, the owner and director of the school; Midwest Academy; Midwest Twister; Midwest Treatment; and Midwest Academy Scholarship Fund have not been served formally with court papers, Dial said. In the lawsuit, the companies are described as “alter ego interlocking Iowa corporate entities” and basically are one-in-the-same.

The suit seeks compensatory damages, punitive damages and a refund of tuition and other payments made to defendants by parents and guardians of the students. According to court documents, the school’s tuition was about \$5,000 a month per student. Some parents paid up to \$46,000 upfront to enroll their children in the school.

Although Dial declined to comment on a five-page statement Ferleger released during a press conference conducted the same day the lawsuit was filed, lawyers and court officials have questioned whether Ferleger’s comments in the statement and at the press conference violated Iowa’s code of ethics for lawyers involving pretrial publicity.

One of several rules governing lawyers’ pretrial actions include statements that go beyond allegations stated in the actual lawsuit.

The American Bar Association’s model rules of professional conduct state, “A lawyer who is participating or has participated in the investigation or litigation of a matter shall not make an extrajudicial statement that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know will be disseminated by means of public communication and will have a substantial likelihood of materially prejudicing an adjudicative proceeding in the matter.

Dial did not comment on any aspects of the case at the press conference other than the specific allegations contained in the lawsuit.

One of the worst

During the press conference, attended by several area newspaper, radio and television reporters, Ferleger called the case against Midwest Academy and Trane one of the worst cases of abuse he has seen in his career.

Ferleger, who has represented clients throughout the United States in similar lawsuits against institutions claiming to be a “specialty school for troubled youth,” said actions by administrators and staff at the academy were illegal.

“Not including the rape or death of a handicapped individual, this is the most extreme situation I have dealt with in 40 years,” he said. “It was not just the

physical violence the children endured, it was the emotional impact they suffered and continue to suffer today.”

Ferleger said at the press conference, “Midwest Academy maintained an illegal environment and a ‘culture’ of punishment, confinement, coercion and physical confrontation and violence, including sexual abuse and harassment.

“Midwest Academy sought to break the will of the vulnerable children entrusted to its care through a harsh and inflexible indoctrination system. Every child witnessed action taken against other students and was placed in fear of similar victimization.”

In his press release, he said Midwest Academy “demonstrated shocking callousness directed at each of the (six) children and its actions and failure to act constituted a willful and wanton disregard for the rights and safety of the vulnerable children.”

Ferleger also claimed in the suit the “Iowa Child Protective Services found defendant Midwest’s director, Benjamin Trane, on Aug. 6, 2015, was found responsible as a perpetrator for child abuse for failure to supervise children, resulting in sexual abuse.”

Whistleblower suit still active

Although Dial is seeking to withdraw from Ferleger’s lawsuit, he still has another lawsuit pending against Midwest Academy for firing an employee who reported “troubling actions” by staff towards students at the school.

Dial represents Cheynne Jerred, a 21-year-old woman, who was dismissed from her job after she contacted a Iowa Department of Human Resources hotline about an employee who she believed was assaulting a student sexually at the school.

“When being terminated from her employment, Jerred was informed by Midwest Academy they were aware she had made a report of suspected child abuse and she should not have made the report nor encouraged the resident to report the sexual abuse,” Dial wrote in his lawsuit, adding Jerred’s actions and disclosures are protected by law.

The incident began when Jerred became aware Nov. 28, 2015, “a resident of Midwest Academy claimed she had been sexually assaulted and harassed by an employee,” court records stated. “Jerred informed the resident she should report the incident.”

Jerred then called the DHS hotline to report the abuse, Dial said.

Dial said Iowa law is clear Midwest Academy officials “engaged in violations of rules of the state, mismanagement, an abuse of authority and substantial and specific danger to the public health and safety.”

He said Jerred’s dismissal violated Iowa’s whistleblower statute. Dial said it is his understanding Jerred’s call to the DHS hotline initiated the criminal investigation by federal, state and local law enforcement agencies into the activities at the school.

Dial said his request to withdraw from Ferleger’s lawsuit would not affect Jerred’s whistleblower lawsuit.

School shut down

After Jerred’s call to the hotline, search warrants were executed Jan. 28 at two locations Midwest Academy owns in Lee County -- at the main campus outside of Keokuk and the Midwest Treatment Center, near Montrose.

“The search warrants stem from an investigation of alleged sexual abuse involving a staff member of the Midwest Academy and a former student of the academy,” said Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation Special Agent Rick Rahn.

Agencies involved in the investigation of the academy include the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Iowa Attorney General’s office, the Iowa Department of Public Safety’s Division of Criminal Investigation Major Crime Unit, Special Enforcement Operations Bureau, Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, Iowa DCI Crime Lab Scene Team, State Fire Marshal’s office, Iowa State Patrol’s Division of Intelligence and Fusion Center and the Lee County Sheriff’s office.

Geoff Greenwood, a communications director for the Iowa Attorney General’s office, said Friday he had nothing new to report on the status of the investigation.

“It’s definitely ongoing,” he said. “However, I think it is going to be quiet sometime before we see any developments.”

The high-priced boarding school claimed in its advertising it specialized in assisting troubled teenagers through a “regimented schedule that provided a climate that youth without internal structure or discipline” would thrive on.

“The limits and rules in the program provide a safety net for the teens, giving them security in knowing that they will not be allowed to go ‘too far,’” the school claimed in its nationwide advertising.

However, information released through interviews with former students portray a disturbing pattern at the school that was in stark contrast to its own portrayal.

Isolation box

Ferleger said one of the most egregious acts at the school was the placement of disruptive students in an “OSS” segregation box, known as “out of school suspension.” It was a small box about 32 square feet in size. He said the cement cell is “fundamentally an isolation box,” where bright lights were kept on 24 hours a day.

“The room is entirely bare except for a mattress put onto the floor at night and, after a child is alone in the room for 19 hours ... a single chair is provided,” the lawsuit stated. “Children have been confined to OSS (boxes) for days and weeks at a time.”

Those placed in the boxes were deprived of access to the bathroom, water and basically starved, according to information in the lawsuit.

“My dog has more access to water than some of the children placed in the segregation rooms,” Ferleger said at the press conference.

“Little food is provided to the students in OSS segregation,” the lawsuit said. “Typically, breakfast is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, with pickle slices and a box of raisins or a half orange or banana; lunch is a turkey sandwich with two slices of meat turkey, pickle slices and box of raisins and water; and dinner is also a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, with a box of raisins and water. ... This is a starvation diet.”

Ferleger said the full day of food consisted of about 802 calories, less than half of what the USDA recommends teenagers consume to provide the calories to facilitate growth.

Named as plaintiffs in the lawsuit were Grace Ferguson Hunt, Kodi Dick, Maria Adelaide Brown, Aaron Dick, Michelle Palinsky, Roger Palinsky, Matthew Meyer, Cheryl Meyer, Elijah Meyer, Radhi Choukaier, Eli Petrova Choukaier and juvenile Z.D. by and through his parent and next friend, Jenne Devereax.

Trane has not commented since the search warrants were executed in January.

No criminal charges have been filed or arrests made in the case.

Anyone with information about Midwest Academy that may be beneficial to the investigation is asked to call (800) CALL-FBI (800-225-5324).

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/readers-watchdog/2016/03/02/search-warrant-info-remains-confidential-midwest-academy-case/81234010/>

Search warrant info remains confidential in Midwest Academy case

[Lee Rood](#), lrood@dmreg.com Published 6:19 p.m. CT March 2, 2016



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(Photo: Lee Rood/The Register)
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The documents used to support search warrants at a southeast Iowa boarding school should eventually be made public, but there is no timeline for when that has to happen, a judge ruled this week.

On Feb. 10, a judge sealed three search warrant applications and other related documents after raids at Midwest Academy near Montrose and Keokuk. No returns, including details of what was seized, were filed in court afterward.

The Des Moines Register filed a court action last month asking a judge to make the documents public immediately.

The newspaper argued in a court hearing Friday that search warrant applications and the returns are typically public under Iowa law.

Midwest Academy owner Benjamin Trane, accused by a former student of sex abuse and other crimes, also asked the court to unseal the search warrant applications and the search warrants.

But Denise Timmins, assistant attorney general for the state, argued the documents should be sealed to protect the multi-faceted state and federal investigation.

ADVERTISING

District Court Judge Mary Ann Brown stated in her ruling that Iowa law no longer requires search warrants to be filed within days after they have been executed.

“Unless or until a return of the search warrant is made by law enforcement to the court, the application for the search warrant and the search warrant shall remain confidential,” Brown wrote.

When the state does file a public search warrant return, the application and the warrants themselves should be public, she said. The only exception was very limited privacy information that is protected under court rules, Brown said.

Lee County Attorney Michael Short has not said when he expects to file the search warrant returns.

<http://whotv.com/2016/01/28/search-warrants-executed-at-boarding-school-for-sex-abuse-investigation/>

Search Warrants Executed at Boarding School for Sex Abuse Investigation

POSTED 2:36 PM, JANUARY 28, 2016, BY [KAIT MCKINNEY](#)

This is an archived article and the information in the article may be outdated. Please look at the time stamp on the story to see when it was last updated.

KEOKUK, Iowa — Authorities are executing two search warrants Thursday at the Midwest Academy campus in Keokuk.

A release by the Iowa Department of Public Safety says the search warrants stem from an investigation of alleged sexual abuse involving a staff member of the Midwest Academy and a former student of the academy.

The academy is a therapeutic boarding school that assists students from all over the country and world.

The first search warrant is being executed at the Midwest Academy campus at 2416 340th St. in Keokuk.

The other warrant is being executed at a second location affiliated with the Midwest Academy at 2818 Hwy. 218 in Montrose.

Authorities did not release any additional information Thursday.

The FBI, Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, Special Enforcement Operations Bureau, Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, Iowa DCI Crime Lab Crime Scene Team, State Fire Marshal Division, Iowa State Patrol, Division of Intelligence and Fusion Center and the Lee County Sheriff's Office are involved in the investigation.

<http://tales-from-the-black-school.blogspot.com/2014/02/various-testimonies-about-midwest.html>

Various testimonies about Midwest Academy in Keokuk, Iowa

These testimonies was found by a simple search on the Internet. The rights of each testimony goes to the authors

Mr. Giffin at Midwest Academy

I spent 6 months at Midwest Academy and I can honestly say it was the worst experience of my life.

The staff controls the kids through fear, abuse, and neglect. The staff are not qualified in any way to be "teaching" the children. They are simply locals who have no other options for employment. Their so called "teachings" are simply this; no food if you break a rule, a 9x9 white concrete cell with cameras that the child must spend 48 hrs in whenever the deem necessary, so called group therapy where the unqualified "dorm parent" gets to yell and verbally abuse the child until the break. There are many more wonderful attributes this place possesses.

They also like to threaten the kids with Tranquility Bay which is in Jamaica and is one of their sister organizations. I suggest if you have not heard about this place look it up. Midwest is not a good place. Don't be fooled by the website or the tour around their "campus" because when potential new parents cone through on the tour they warn the kids to smile and look happy or they will be severely punished.

If you do not believe any of my testimony I assure you that your child will be physically and emotionally scarred if and when they make it out of there. There are better ways to deal with so called "troubled youth". MIDWEST ACADEMY is not the answer I promise you

Mr. Savard at Casa by the Sea and Midwest Academy

I was there for 21 months and am very dissatisfied with my expirience...it was the most terrible thing that has ever happened to me.

I spent 3 months at Casa by the Sea, a boarding school that was run by the same people, WWASP. That was in MEXICO and it got shut down because they were running things illegally and I wouldnt doubt that this place has its faults like Casa did. In fact I can easily say it destroyed my teenage life and left me wondering how to be normal for quite some time.

I have just recently started to piece together my life almost 6 years later. Im now 22 and have hate that the time I spent there having not helped me at all, for long periods of time I was ignored and emotionally abused, and by the brainwashing seminars that they hold at WWASP facilites are unreal...

I am begging any parents that have thoughts of sending their children to these types of places to please re-evaulate what it is that their child/teen needs and to handle it in a much healthier way for them and their family. Nothing good will come of sending your youth to this program...I promise.

Carpe Omnia at Midwest Academy

I spent 15 months at Midwest Academy. It was overall a terrible experience. I usually tell people I spent 15 months in juvenile detention because that's really what it is. I know MWA can be used as an alternative to jail time. It was a really crazy place and they did care a lot about money.

I missed out on a lot of my life but it made me who I am today. I definitely became a stronger person after going through that experience. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone though. Overall it was just a very abusive and controlling place.

Sources:

- [Mr. Giffins testimony](#) (Google Plus)
- [Mr. Savards testimony](#) (Google Plus)
- [Mr. Omnias testimony](#) (Google Plus)
- [Factsheet about Midwest Academy](#) (Fornits Wiki)
- [Factsheet about Casa by the Sea](#) (Fornits Wiki)

<http://www.thehawkeye.com/e89257f2-5a46-5666-9e93-627f2648d89c.html>

Sexual abuse allegation at Midwest Academy under investigation

By Will Smith

Posted Jan 29, 2016 at 12:01 AM Updated Jan 29, 2016 at 5:00 AM

KEOKUK -- Local law enforcement agencies executed two search warrants Thursday at the Midwest Academy stemming from an investigation of alleged sexual abuse at the boarding school.

According to the Iowa Department of Public Safety, the abuse allegation involves a staff member from the Midwest Academy and a former student.

The first search warrant was executed at the Midwest Academy campus in Keokuk, while the second warrant was executed at a location affiliated with the Midwest Academy at 2818 US 218, Montrose.

No further information was released about the investigation Thursday.

Founded in 2002, Midwest Academy is a therapeutic boarding school that assists struggling teenagers.

The Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation Major Crime Unit, the Iowa DCI Crime Lab Scene Team, the Iowa State Patrol Division of Intelligence and the Fusion Center, the FBI and the Lee County Sheriff's Office executed the search warrants.

https://www.mississippivalleypublishing.com/daily_gate/news/midwest-academy-students-collect-items-for-two-local-food-pantries/article_cdf1ac37-305e-590c-a2f0-00ffffc6e372.html

Midwest Academy students collect items for two local food pantries

- By Diane Vance/Gate City Staff Writer

- Dec 31, 2008

The Mississippi River shows the impact of the Flood of 2008 in this picture taken from the Keokuk-Hamilton bridge on June 16. Not only is Victory Park submerged in the foreground, but also the George M. Verity Museum and Southside Boat Club are surrounded by water.

A suggestion from staff proved to be a learning opportunity as well as a community service project for students. And that will result in a boost to food pantries at two Keokuk churches.

Students at Midwest Academy held a two-week challenge between the boys and girls to raise money and/or collect non-perishable food items.

“We discussed collecting food items after reading in the Daily Gate City that food pantries were having a hard time keeping up,” said Tara Sparrow, Midwest Academy admissions coordinator.

“Our parent support association then took over organizing the project. They organize an activity about once a month.”

The two teams collected money and/or food from family. The private school's staff also donated money and brought in food items.

“We had ‘wear jeans to work’ days where we could dress in jeans if we paid into the food drive,” said Shasta Thurman, student supervisor.

The food drive was more work than either Sparrow or Thurman had anticipated. It also was more successful. The students raised more than \$1,200 to shop with locally.

On Monday, 1,814 items will be delivered to the churches.

“The majority of this will be taken to God's Way Christian Center,” said Thurman.

God's Way Christian Center, 1629 Des Moines St., Keokuk, runs a free soup kitchen four days a week as well as a food pantry and clothes closet. Midwest Academy students will deliver the food and help organize and serve dinner Monday at God's Way.

Some of the items will go to United Presbyterian Church, 102 Main St., Keokuk. The church offers a free “brown bag” meal the last Sunday each month to the community and also stocks a food pantry.

Canned foods, boxed macaroni, breakfast cereal, bottles of ketchup, salad dressings, jars of peanut butter, Ramen noodle packages and so much more was piled in a spare room at Midwest Academy.

On Tuesday, three upper level students counted the boys' collections. The girls' stockpile had already been counted and sorted.

“I went shopping a week ago,” said Tony Urban, a student. “Another guy and I went to Walmart. We filled a cart with food items. We selected the items. We ended up buying foods and juices that might appeal to kids.”

Jacob Eilerman also shopped with another student at Walmart on Monday.

“We had \$150 and filled two shopping carts,” he said.

Thurman made four shopping trips with the boys team. Part of the challenge was to track purchases and stay within the amount of cash each team took shopping.

“We had to put some stuff back,” said Urban about his shopping trip.

Eilerman calculated how much was in the carts, removed one can of tuna fish and ended up with just a few cents to spare.

“It taught me how to grocery shop with a budget,” he said. “It was a challenge to figure out how to buy the necessary staples.”

Each team spent the donations they had worked to collect. Midwest Academy girls collected less money than the boys yet came out ahead in the number of food items they were able to buy.

“It's a competition to see which team purchased more items,” said Thurman. “The winning team will get a party.”

She would not disclose the final food counts to Urban, Eilerman and Suvham Metra who helped count the boys' food items on Tuesday.

“It will be announced on Eagle News,” she told them.

The boys collected 812 items; the girls, who chose to shop at Aldi's, have 1,002 items to donate to the churches.

<http://www.wgem.com/story/13702741/students-in-keokuk-provide-gifts-to-families-in-need>

Keokuk students provide gifts to families in need

○ 2

Posted: Dec 17, 2010 10:09 AM CST



KEOKUK, Ia. (WGEM) -- They've experienced a lot of adversity in their young lives, but this holiday season, a group of troubled teens took the focus off of themselves and gave to others.

Students at Midwest Academy in Keokuk raised more than \$1,000 to buy Christmas gifts for three local families in need this year.

This is the third year in a row students at Midwest Academy have adopted a family for Christmas, and for some, giving to a family in need is helping them feel what they say is the true meaning of Christmas

"My mom kind of asked me what I want for Christmas while I was here and I just didn't really have anything to ask for. You know, a lot of times, it's just kind of, Christmas is kind of very like materialistic to a lot of people," said 18-year-old Frank Heine.

But for Heine, buying presents for kids in need was about more than just supplying material gifts.

"Especially for the boys. What would I like if I were, what was I into when I was nine years old?" said Heine.

The school says learning how to give is an important lesson for teenagers.

"In order to receive things they have to first give," said Shasta Heidreder, with the Midwest Academy, "and that's what's caused a lot of our students issues."

Students who come to Midwest Academy are often struggling with a variety of issues, ranging from depression to drugs. But together, they were able to look past their own struggles and beyond the walls of their school to raise enough money for seven local kids to get a Christmas they'll probably never forget.

"It really does feel better to give than to receive. I mean, I know we're always told that when we're like younger and you know as children and you kind of don't understand that, but once you get a little bit older you kind of understand that that's really what Christmas is all about," said Heine.

Most of the donations for the gifts came from the students' families.

One check didn't make it in time for today, so in addition to the \$1,009 the kids spent on Christmas presents today, another \$500 will soon be donated to a local food shelf.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/maia-szalavitz/abuse-history-no-bar-to-f_b_38435.html

01/11/2007 03:50 pm ET **Updated** May 25, 2011

Abuse History No Bar to For-Profit Teen Biz: Arrest Probably Won't End It, Either

By [Maia Szalavitz](#)

Admitting to pepper-spraying a teenager “more than two times a day” as a means of discipline might be seen by some as a bar to opening and operating a school for troubled children. Conceding, on videotape that “from somebody on the outside looking in, I would say it would be abusive,” seems even less likely to make you a winner in this area.

And in fact, when Randall Hinton, who made those admissions in a French documentary, sought to buy a military school in Missouri and use it as a facility for “troubled teens,” these and other accounts of abuse prompted the school’s owners to reject his plan.

That didn’t stop Hinton and his associates from the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASP or WWASPS) from trying again in Colorado— where they founded the Royal Gorge Academy in Canon City in 2006 (also known as Royal Peak Academy).

Now Hinton has been arrested on charges of “false imprisonment,” with claims that he made a teenage girl lie on the floor for six hours, injured her wrists and denied her medical attention. According to a local television station, a Royal Gorge employee told police that Hinton also slammed a boy’s face into the floor until he bled.

Of course, at his previous place of employment, the WWASP-linked facility Tranquility Bay in Jamaica, six hours of lying on the floor is a minor sanction. The owner of that school claimed that the “record” time his program made a child lie on the floor during waking hours was 18 months in an interview with the British paper, The Observer.

Tranquility Bay is also notorious for assaults by staff on students— one filed a lawsuit after a restraint resulted in a broken jaw. In that case as well, medical attention was withheld from the victim. The program is still open.

A man involved in the operation of a WWASP-affiliated Mexican program that sent teens to a off-campus site that kept them in outdoor dog cages now operates a WWASP-linked facility in upstate New York, known as Academy at Ivy Ridge.

Recently, an Ivy Ridge employee was fired for forcing two teenage girls into oral sex and New York state made the same facility to return some \$2 million to parents because it had falsely claimed to be an accredited state high school. In late 2006, the state denied its application to be accredited and noted health and safety problems with training, students disciplining other students, restraint and denial of bathroom access.

The man who runs WWASP's MidWest Academy, formerly headed their program in Samoa. That one was shut down following a U.S. State Department-led investigation which found "credible allegations of physical abuse" including "beatings, isolation, food and water deprivation, choke-holds, kicking, punching, bondage, spraying with chemical agents, forced medication, [and] verbal abuse." Mexico has shuttered three WWASP-linked programs, Costa Rica one and the Czech Republic, another.

But here in the U.S., it's business as usual in upstate New York, South Carolina, Iowa, and Utah— and Americans can still send their kids to Jamaica's Tranquility Bay. Why is this organization and its employees allowed to operate facilities for vulnerable and disturbed children in 21st century America— and when will the federal government finally step in to stop them, once and for all?

<http://www.thegazette.com/2010/02/10/former-iowa-city-counselor-found-guilty-of-abusing-child>

Former Iowa City counselor found guilty of abusing child

Donald Lyle Clark breaks down as he sits with Defense attorney John Robertson after being found guilty of second-degree sex abuse Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2010 in Johnson County District Court in Iowa City. Clark now faces up to 25 years in prison. (Brian Ray/The Gazette)

Feb 10, 2010 at 2:13 pm | [Print View](#)

A Johnson County jury found former elementary guidance counselor Donald Clark guilty of sexually abusing a fifth grade student during the 2003-04 school year.

Clark faces up to 25 years in prison for second-degree sexual abuse on a child under the age of 12.

The victim, now 16, claimed Clark, 41, had touched and rubbed him during individual counseling sessions in Clark's office.

Clark took the stand in his own defense to deny the allegations made by the boy.

For the jury, it came down to one question -- did they believe Clark or his young victim? It took 6 1/2 hours to decide the young man was telling the truth.

Clark worked at the school for seven years and retired in 2008.

The victim saw Clark about once a week during the fifth grade to help him adjust to Lemme. A shy, withdrawn student, he had moved to Lemme during the fourth grade. The move was the result of the boy's lack of motivation and poor grades.

His parents testified that after a year at Lemme their son was no longer just shy and withdrawn, but increasingly angry and violent.

They said he cut himself, attempted suicide and abused drugs and alcohol. They blame Clark for the changes in their son's behavior.

After repeated attempts to help their son, they sent him to Midwest Academy, a highly structured residential facility in Keokuk.

It was there, shortly after his arrival, that he told of the abuse at the hands of his former guidance counselor.

Clark said he believed the boy fabricated the abuse because he was unhappy at Midwest Academy and wanted to come home.

Clark's mother could be heard quietly sobbing as her son was led from the courtroom in handcuffs.

E-FILED 2017 NOV 17 11:05 AM LEE SOUTH - KEOKUK - CLERK OF DISTRICT COURT

Editorial: Who is looking out for these kids?

The Register's editorial Published 9:53 p.m. CT Feb. 6, 2016 | Updated 9:49 a.m. CT Feb. 7, 2016



(Photo: The Register)

Twelve days ago, dozens of law enforcement officers descended on Midwest Academy in Keokuk and Montrose to execute search warrants (http://www.dps.state.ia.us/commis/pib/Releases/2016/01-28-2016_DCI_IowaDCIExecutingSearchWarrantsAtMidwestAcademy.html). The warrants stemmed from alleged sexual abuse involving a staff member and a former resident at the facility for teenagers. The Iowa Department of Human Services was called to assist and conducted dozens of child abuse assessments. A state probe is ongoing, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has a separate investigation underway and the public is left with many questions.

The editorial board's first question: What the heck is Midwest Academy?

Iowa lawmakers should be asking that question too. Regardless of the outcome of investigations, this type of private facility for children raises concerns that should be addressed. Iowa should not be home to youth facilities subject to no oversight, accreditation or licensure by the state. We have an obligation to protect children.

Midwest Academy advertises itself as a "therapeutic boarding school" for "struggling teens" dealing with everything from anger and delinquency to substance abuse and emotional problems. It offers "a safe and secure environment in which adolescents can receive academic support, counseling and therapy," according to its website. It is the kind of place sought online by desperate parents who have tried everything else to help a troubled child.

Who is behind Midwest Academy?

Yet this facility is not a school accredited by the [Iowa Department of Education](https://www.educateiowa.gov/pk-12/accreditation-program-approval) (<https://www.educateiowa.gov/pk-12/accreditation-program-approval>). That means it is not required to meet specific standards and guidelines or report educational information to anyone. (Scattergood Friends School, a boarding and day school in West Branch, for example, does have state accreditation). Though the facility claims to have an affiliation with the Keokuk Community School District, the superintendent told an editorial writer last week that the teens "are definitely not attending school here" and the district does not receive any state funding for them.

The academy is also not a designated [psychiatric medical health institution for children](http://dhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/PMIC.pdf) (<http://dhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/PMIC.pdf>). It is not a residential treatment center, group home, shelter home, child care facility, or any other juvenile facility identified in Iowa Code and subject to state oversight. It is not even registered as a [boarding home](https://dia.iowa.gov/document/registered-boarding-homes) (<https://dia.iowa.gov/document/registered-boarding-homes>) with the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals. The Iowa Department of Human Services also does not oversee the facility, but it has broad authority to conduct evaluations when the abuse of a child is alleged. Though other media outlets are reporting claims about children being sent home or "removed," DHS will not confirm that.

While this private facility flies under the state's radar until there are allegations of abuse, the [Federal Trade Commission](http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0185-residential-treatment-programs-teens) (<http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0185-residential-treatment-programs-teens>) cautions parents about such programs. They go by a variety of names, including wilderness therapy programs, boot camps and therapeutic boarding schools.

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"The programs are not regulated by the federal government and many are not subject to state licensing or monitoring as mental health or education facilities, either," according to the FTC. It references a 2007 [report \(http://www.gao.gov/assets/120/118038.pdf\)](http://www.gao.gov/assets/120/118038.pdf) to Congress that found thousands of allegations of abuse in residential programs, some of which involved the death of teens. Government investigators identified "boarding schools" as programs that "often enroll youth whose parents force them to attend against their will." Wilderness schools promising to rehabilitate teens can cost as much as \$438 per day.

The Midwest Academy website does not reveal the cost of tuition on its website. It does, however, direct parents to a company offering loans with interest rates as high as 36 percent. Staff would not answer questions about cost — or anything else — posed by an editorial writer. They were advised by their attorney not to do so.

According to the academy's website, youths have access to services provided by a mental health counselor and social worker, individuals we were able to confirm are licensed by the state. Several "teachers" are identified by only first names, so we could not confirm licensure. There also does not appear to be any medical professional on staff. Are the "struggling" teens prescribed medication? By whom? Do employees undergo background checks? How many kids live there, and where are they from?

No state agency can answer any of these questions, because none of them is responsible for any aspect of this private facility. That creates a situation ripe for abuse. A residential facility essentially taking custody of "struggling" children should not fly under the radar of government in the 21st century.

Cautions on private 'boarding schools'

The Federal Trade Commission [advises parents \(http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0185-residential-treatment-programs-teens\)](http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0185-residential-treatment-programs-teens) to diligently research any private residential treatment program they're considering for a child. These programs, offering everything from drug treatment to military-style discipline, are frequently not monitored by any government entity. Parents should confirm claims about staff credentials, education credit transfers and endorsements. "Accreditations" may be membership organizations that do not conduct site inspections or evaluations of the programs. Below are some of the questions the FTC advises parents to ask representatives of any program being considered. The commission also encourages parents to confirm answers.

Are you licensed by the state? If so, get the name of the state agency and confirm. If the program cannot provide an agency, consider it a red flag.

Do you provide an academic curriculum, and do you have teachers certified or licensed by the state?

Do you have a clinical director, and what are his/her credentials?

Do you conduct background checks on employees?

What are the criteria for admission, and how are any pre-admission assessments conducted?

How do you handle medical issues, and is there a licensed nurse or doctor on the premises?

How do you define success, and how is it rated?

How do you discipline youth?

Can I contact/speak with my child when I want, and can the child contact me when he or she wants?

What are the costs, what do they cover, and what is the refund policy if the program doesn't work out?

Teen with depression commits suicide

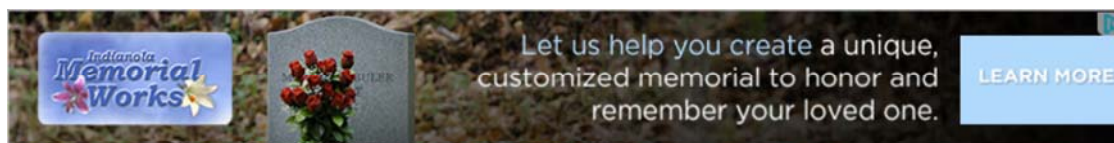
A [report to Congress \(http://www.gao.gov/assets/120/118038.pdf\)](http://www.gao.gov/assets/120/118038.pdf) from the Government Accountability Office found cases involving serious abuse, neglect and deaths at private, residential programs for teens. The report includes photographs of the exterior of a "boarding school" (also called "academies") visited by government investigators. It had video monitoring, fencing and wire mesh over the windows.

"Case 5" in the report involved the death of a 14-year-old male. His father told government investigators his son had been diagnosed with clinical depression, attempted suicide twice, was on medication and was being treated by a psychiatrist. After consulting with experts, they enrolled him in a private West Virginia treatment center and boarding school that cost \$255 per day. From the GAO report:

"According to the parents and court documents, the victim committed suicide six days into the program. On the day before he killed himself, while participating in the first phase of the program ("survival training"), the victim deliberately cut his left arm four times from wrist to elbow using a pocket knife issued to him by the school. After cutting himself, the victim approached a counselor and showed him what he had done, pleading with the counselor to

take the knife away before he hurt himself again. He also asked the counselor to call his mother and tell her that he wanted to go home. The counselor spoke with the victim, elicited a promise from him not to hurt himself again, and gave the knife back. The next evening the victim hung himself with a cord not far from his tent. Four hours passed before the program chose to notify the family about the suicide. When the owner of the program finally called the family to notify them, according to the father, the owner said, "There was nothing we could do."

Read or Share this story: <http://dmreg.co/1Xbg2n1>



E-FILED 2017 NOV 17 11:05 AM LEE SOUTH - KEOKUK - CLERK OF DISTRICT COURT

Who is behind Midwest Academy?

The Register's Editorial Published 4:01 a.m. CT Feb. 7, 2016 | Updated 9:18 a.m. CT Feb. 7, 2016



(Photo: The Register)

State and county records indicate that in 2003, a partnership run by Robert Lichfield of Utah bought the Midwest Academy property in Keokuk from Lee County, paying \$500,000 for it, and three years later transferred the deed to a limited liability company called Midwest Twister. Lee County tax records indicate that company's mailing address is the office of Lichfield's R & B Management company in Utah.

Lichfield is the founder of the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools, a company that, according to court records, has had ties with at least 26 different boarding schools or treatment centers around the world, generating up to \$90 million in annual gross revenue.

Midwest Academy consists of eight buildings, including residence halls, a gymnasium, a metal shop and an auditorium, with an assessed value of just under \$2 million.

Between 2005 and 2012, five federal lawsuits were filed against WWASPS, Lichfield, R & B Management or their affiliates, each alleging some form of fraud or mistreatment of the students enrolled in the company's boarding schools or treatment centers. All of the cases were dismissed prior to trial. Allegations included unsanitary living conditions; physical, verbal and emotional abuse; and prolonged periods of isolation. One student's family claimed their son was subjected to sexual abuse, locked in a dog cage, forced to eat his own vomit, and ordered to use the same toothbrush with which he scrubbed toilets.

Editorial: Who is looking out for these kids?

Court records indicate that in 2004 a counselor at WWASPS' Majestic Ranch Academy in Utah was convicted of child abuse in the form of neglect.

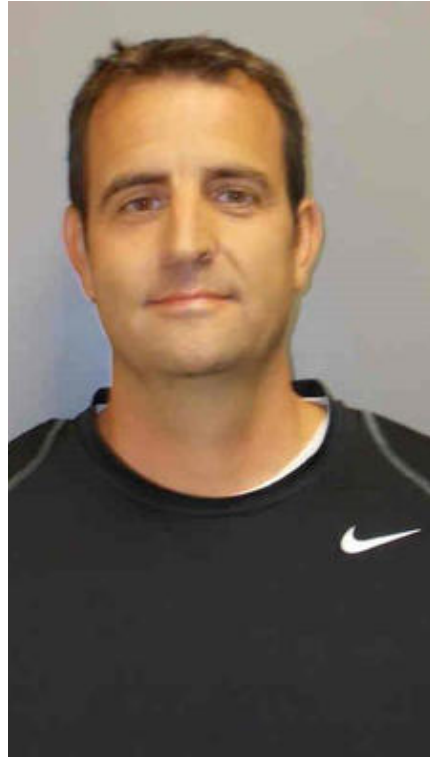
In 2005, the WWASP-affiliated Academy at Ivy Ridge in Ogdensburg, N.Y., entered into an agreement with the state attorney general who had accused the school of "repeated and persistent fraudulent and illegal conduct" by handing out high school diplomas it had no legal authority to award.

In 2007, the director of the Lichfield-affiliated Royal Gorge Academy in Colorado was convicted of false imprisonment and assault after being accused of mistreating students there.

Also in 2007, the state of Nevada suspended the license of the WWASPS-affiliated Sky View Academy after confirming that two students at the school had sexually assaulted a third student, and that staff members were involved in "hazing" the students.

Read or Share this story: <http://dmreg.co/1XbvXSr>

Iowa boarding school owner charged with abusing teenage students



Former Midwest Academy owner Ben Trane is shown in this Sept. 6, 2017 in booking photo released by the Lee County Sheriff's Office in Montrose, Iowa. (AP)

By **Associated Press**

SEPTEMBER 8, 2017, 10:11 AM | IOWA CITY, IOWA

Investigators say the former owner of an Iowa boarding school used his position to coerce one teenager into a sexual relationship and others to undress for his arousal.

Former Midwest Academy owner Benjamin Trane is charged with third-degree sexual abuse, sexual exploitation by a counselor and child endangerment.

He turned himself in Thursday after a 19-month investigation into abuse allegations at the private, for-profit boarding school Trane operated in Keokuk. The school, which had about 100 students from mostly well-off families, closed in January 2016.

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Investigators allege that Trane coerced one student to engage in sex acts in order to advance in the program and be allowed to contact relatives. Trane also allegedly had others undress for "body image therapy" sessions he led, and kept students in isolation for extended periods.

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