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Boys school probe stirs painful memories

- Story Highlights
- Former students talk about brutal days at a Florida reform school
- One recalls hearing the tip of a whip hit the ceiling before it came down on him
- Another regrets being too afraid to help a boy left in a tumble dryer
- Third remembers beatings by a guard called "the whipper"

By Rich Phillips
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MARIANNA, Florida (CNN) -- Leaning against his cane, Bryant Middleton shuffled toward the makeshift cemetery. Tears welled in his eyes as he leaned down to touch one of the crosses.

"This shouldn't be," he said. "This shouldn't be."

Thirty-one crosses made of tubular steel and painted white line up unevenly in the grass and weeds of what used to be the grounds of a reform school in Marianna, Florida. The anonymous crosses are rusting away but their secrets may soon be exposed.

When boys disappeared from the school, administrators explained it away, said former student Roger Kiser.

They'd say, "Well, he ran away and the swamp got him," Kiser recalled. Or, "The gators got him." Or, "Water moccasins got him."

Kiser and other former students believe authorities will soon find the remains of children and teens sent to the Florida School for Boys half a century ago.  [Watch Middleton kneel by the crosses »](#)

On the orders of Gov. Charlie Crist, the [Florida Department of Law Enforcement](#) last week opened an investigation to determine if anyone is buried here, whether crimes were committed, and if so, who was responsible.

A group of men in their 60s, who once attended the school, have told investigators they believe the bodies are classmates who disappeared after being savagely beaten by administrators and workers.

The FDLE is just beginning its investigation, so there is no way to know if there is any truth to the allegations. The investigation will be challenging. Finding records and witnesses from nearly half a century ago will be difficult if not impossible. Many of the administrators and employees of the reform school are dead. [Read more about the investigation](#)


Middleton is 64 now, a former Army Ranger. He was 14 then, a wayward boy. He was sent to the Florida School for Boys for breaking and entering.


He recently accompanied CNN to the school grounds.

"This is a travesty against mankind and the state of Florida should be ashamed of themselves," he said, choking back tears.

"It's as if they were tossed out here like they were nothing but garbage. And it's just downright criminal. Somebody needs to be accountable for this."

A single-story, nondescript building anchors the other side of the property. The white cinder block structure looks so simple, so bland, that it is difficult to imagine the pain, terror and torture it conjures up in the men who say their childhoods were ravaged within its four walls.

The building was known as "the white house."  [Watch a former student return to the building »](#)

Middleton said he was brought there six times. He recalled that his tormentors, including one known as "the whipper," would turn on a large industrial fan to muffle the screams of the boys who were beaten with long leather straps, reinforced with metal.  [See photos from Middleton's reform school days »](#)

Dick Colon said he went to the white house 11 times during his 30 months at the school. He's one of four men known as "the White House Boys."

Colon, Kiser, Robert Straley and Michael O'McCarthy, the original four White House Boys, spoke out about the 31 crosses and their boyhood abuse and pushed for an investigation.

Colon recalls his visits to the white house as if they were yesterday:

He said he was forced to lie face down in a blood-soaked pillow -- a pillow with small pieces of lips, tongue and skin on it from the previous boy. He'd clench the metal bar of the bed. The ceilings were low. He would hear the strap hit the ceiling and make a "tick" sound before it swung down on him.

"After that tick, you'd go 'Aaaahh,' and then you'd grab that bar, and go 'Oooooohhhhhh,' and the spindles of the bed would bounce, and sometimes the bed would come off the ground," Colon told CNN.

 [Watch Colon's face contort as he relives the beatings »](#)

Kiser, a fellow White House Boy, said the beatings provided entertainment for the guards and administrators.

"There were bets, and money changed hands on who could draw blood on the first blow," he said. He recalled his reaction when he went into a bathroom to clean up after enduring another beating.

"I looked up into that mirror and I just screamed," he said. "I just saw this monster. I couldn't even tell who I was."

Colon said his reaction was to bury the pain inside. He told a story about how another boy's terror left him wrestling with his own best and worst instincts even to this day.

He walked into the school's laundry room one day and saw a black teenager inside a large tumble dryer that was running. He wanted to save the boy, and tried to talk himself into being brave.

"I said, 'Do it! Do it! Do it!' " he recalled, his eyes beginning to tear. "And then I thought to myself, 'If you do it, they're gonna put you in there. You're gonna be next.' And I walked away."

After a long, tearful pause, Colon continued.

"I've been married to my wife for 42 years, and never told her," he said, wiping tears away with a handkerchief. "I don't know how often in a week I think about that."

"A chicken s---, I was," he sobbed.

Still, Colon's is ultimately a success story. At the reform school, he studied to be an electrician and now owns a multimillion-dollar company in Baltimore, Maryland.

Colon founded a scholarship fund for high achievers at the very same school that haunts his memories. It is called the Arthur Dozier School for Boys, and Colon returns every year to talk to the students about hope and hard work.

"They need to know they can do things and have a future," he said. "Many just accept that they will be in prison someday."

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