

JUDGE: GIRL'S TREATMENT 'SMACKS OF ABUSE'

Sun Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL) (Published as Sun-Sentinel) - March 9, 1990

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- Edition: ALL EDITIONS
- Section: LOCAL
- Page: 1A

A Coral Springs couple commits a rebellious daughter to a drug treatment center in Lake Worth. Fifteen months later, 15-year-old Dana is "a child whose spirit and sense of confidence has been totally crushed," a psychiatrist finds.

Dana, like many shell-shocked war veterans, suffers "post-traumatic stress disorder" stemming from her time with Growing Together Inc., according to a diagnosis from Coral Springs psychiatrist Stephen Moskowitz, who was hired by Dana's parents.

As a result of letters from Dana's mother to Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Michael Gersten, who signed the order committing Dana for drug treatment, the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services conducted an investigation into her allegations of abuse committed at the center.

On Thursday, findings of that investigation were given to Gersten, who said that what he had heard and seen "smacks of child abuse."

"Until such time as I am convinced in my own mind that yours is a competent program, I as a judge will not be entering orders of placement into your program," he told Growing Together Executive Director Barbara Griffith. "I don't think I legitimately could."

The HRS findings paint a scenario in which:

-- Youths more advanced in the program have authority to tackle the newcomers to the floor to discipline them, even after two previous written citations from HRS.

-- Children are prohibited from communicating with their families until they earn that privilege, which, in Dana's case, took more than three months.

-- Newcomers to the program have no privacy and are taken by the hand or by the belt loop to the bathroom.

-- Children sleep on floors in locked bedrooms, violating fire and safety standards.

-- Youths do not always have their own clean towels and bedding.

-- Clients do not have qualified counselors assigned to work one-on-one with them.

-- They are not told that they are allowed to file grievances about the program.

"The state does not sanction this in any way, shape or form. The state does not sanction the restraint of kids by other kids, the lack of privacy or the lack of visitation," said Rik Pavlescak, HRS district director of substance abuse services, who headed the investigation. "Kids in detention center have more rights than kids coming into this program. People in jail do."

In a certified letter sent on Thursday, HRS District Administrator Robert Williams gave Growing Together until May 8 to correct violations or have its license revoked.

Griffith, who said she had not seen the HRS letter, did not comment on the findings.

She said part of Dana's problem centered on conflict in her family. She said Growing Together officials had told the parents they were free to withdraw their daughter if they were not happy with her treatment.

Petitions signed by Dana's mother when she sought the court order stated that Dana was a habitual abuser of alcohol, marijuana and Actifed.

In a letter to Gersten asking for relief from the last court order that kept Dana in the center, the mother said her daughter really had no drug problem, but had been rebellious in not making curfew and hanging out with the wrong crowd.

After Gersten took the parents to task for the contradiction, they said they initially trusted the judgment of Growing Together officials who had evaluated their daughter and told them to get court orders for involuntary drug treatment.

"I was in fear. My 13- or 14-year-old daughter was running away." said the father, a printer in Broward County. "I succumbed to the

program."

Dana's parents took her to Growing Together in October 1988 after she returned home after being gone for five days. They paid \$6,000 as an initial fee plus \$525 monthly, the mother said. Dana told a psychologist she did not use drugs but had been drunk every weekend for the past eight or nine months, according to Growing Together's screening report. Growing Together psychologist Michael Warner concluded that she had an "active drug orientation."

Dana left Growing Together for good on Jan. 24 -- the same day she saw Moskowitz, who eventually determined that she underwent "severe psychological trauma" in the program. He recommended she never return.

She now is enrolled in Crossroads School in Davie for children with learning and emotional difficulties.

- *Index terms: PROFILE GROWING TOGETHER; FLORIDA HRS; REHABILITATION CENTER; CRIME MISMANAGEMENT; TEENAGE; CRIME CHILD ABUSE; YOUTH; JUVENILE; SUBSTANCE ABUSE*
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