

## 'Abused' client wins \$4.5 million

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\$4.5M to

'abused'

client

Teen treatment

counselors accused

A woman who enrolled in a controversial treatment program for troubled teens in 1987 and claims to have suffered abuse at the hands of her counselors, won a \$4.5 million settlement just days before a trial in Hudson County Superior Court was set to begin.

Rebecca Ehrlich, now 29, sued V. Miller Newton, the former director of KIDS of North Jersey, a rehabilitation center for troubled teenagers, charging civil rights violations, assault and medical malpractice. Ehrlich was held captive, deprived of sleep and subjected to strip searches, according to her attorney. Newton, a self-described medical anthropologist and former Methodist minister, ran the program in Hackensack and then in Secaucus for 14 years. The state finally cut off the organization's Medicaid funding amid lawsuits alleging fraud.

But it was not only financial improprieties that cast suspicion over Newton and his program. In 1993, three KIDS counselors - themselves former patients - were convicted of beating teen-agers in their charge.

Newton, who now lives in Madiera Beach, Fla., could not be reached for comment. His attorney, John O'Farrell, did not return a phone call to his office requesting comment.

Those crimes, however, were just the tip of the iceberg, according to Phil Elberg, Ehrlich's attorney.

Elberg compared Newton to a cult leader. In order to understand Newton's behavior, one must know "what a manipulative, charismatic guy he is," said Elberg.

At first, Newton's program appeared to many parents of addicted or troubled teens as one of simple "tough love." Parents and former clients both praised and condemned Newton and his program in a series of articles in The Jersey Journal in 1993. Ehrlich's mother, Harryet, said she believed Newton could help cure her daughter's behavioral problems.

"As parents we were doing whatever we could, we had exhausted all the regular options N1Nthat were out there and he seemed to have the answers," said Harryet Ehrlich.

Newton's answers involved a strict regimen in which patients were divided into five categories or "phases," depending on how long they had been in the program.

Teen-agers in phase one, who Newton called "newcomers," or patients who had just entered KIDS, were not allowed to leave the facilities and were completely stripped of their privacy, according to Elberg.

Rebecca was in phase one for three years, according to her mother. During that time she could not do anything on her own, from eating to using the bathroom, her mother said.

Rebecca was also barred from visiting privately with her parents. During their weekly visits, she was "belt looped" - held from behind by her beltloops - by one of the "oldtimers," or patients with more time logged at KIDS, according to Elberg.

Isolation and abuse were common at KIDS, said Ehrlich and Elberg, and patients were told that if they informed their parents of what was happening, they would remain in phase one indefinitely, not allowed to leave or spend a single moment unsupervised.

When questioned about the severity of the treatment, Newton said Rebecca was "going out for attention," said Harryet Ehrlich.

Desperate to help their emotionally unstable daughter, the Ehrlichs continued with Newton's program.

When Rebecca became an oldtimer herself, newcomers would stay in her house, locked in for the night under Newton's orders.

"There were times I had eight patients in my house," says Harryet. She said she would do their laundry, cook them breakfast and drive them to KIDS for the daily rounds of treatment.

When Newton finally had to close KIDS in 1998, there were many families, like the Ehrlichs, who were left with troubled youths and nowhere to turn, according to Elberg.

Rebecca entered private therapy and was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, or manic depression. It was this illness, her mother said, that led to the erratic and uncontrollable behavior that landed her in KIDS in the first place.

"Rebecca went in with an undiagnosed mental illness," Harryet Ehrlich said. "Because she was never treated for it, the illness became worse . . . she left with post-traumatic stress disorder which makes her bipolar worse."

These further psychiatric problems, compounded by the fact that the psychiatrists Newton used never diagnosed or even saw Rebecca, caused Ehrlich's damages, according to Elberg.

"The significance of the amount of money highlights the seriousness of this issue," said Elberg. "This is a guy who came along and said 'Trust me: If you do exactly what I say to do, then your kid will be fine. If you don't do what I say they will end up dead.' "

The \$4.5 million will be paid out by the insurance carriers of Newton and the KIDS psychiatrists named in the suit.

The doctors Newton hired as medical directors admitted to stamping their signatures on insurance claims forms for fictitious treatments, according to Elberg.

Other former patients at KIDS can file separate suits against Newton and his organization but there is a statute of limitations of two years in malpractice cases.

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