

From abuse comes art - Closed Secaucus rehab clinic inspires film

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In order to prepare for the movie "Over the GW," director Nick Gaglia had star George Gallagher do a little acting exercise.

"We were reading scenes, and he suddenly grabbed me and pushed me down on my wrists, and it was torture," Gallagher recalls. "I couldn't get up. I was in pain."

What Gaglia was re-creating, for Gallagher's benefit, was an ordeal he went through routinely as an inmate of KIDS of North Jersey — a controversial, now-defunct rehabilitation clinic in Secaucus (first established in Hackensack) that might be described as combining aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous, Marine boot camp and Jim Jones' retreat in Guyana.

Troubled teens, most with serious drug problems, slept in windowless rooms, were accompanied everywhere from the kitchen to the toilet stall, were often completely cut off from parents, and were subject to physical, emotional and, sometimes, sexual abuse, Gaglia says.

He knows — he was there for 2½ years.

"You weren't allowed to talk to your parents," Gaglia recalls. "You weren't allowed to look out of the car window. You weren't allowed to read. If you read the back of the ketchup, you got yelled at."

The 24-year-old Gaglia, a Bronx native, tapped into those experiences for "Over the GW," an independent film (Gaglia wrote and directed) that was the opening feature this past Friday at Slamdance, a weeklong independent film festival in Park City, Utah.

"The movie isn't about KIDS of North Jersey, but it's about a facility that mirrors a lot of the abuse that I went through," Gaglia says.

The first-time director, who is still looking for a distributor for his \$30,000 indie film, wanted to make sure that the actor playing Tony Serra — a character partly based on himself — really had a visceral sense of what the cult-like conditions at the rehabilitation center were like.

That's why he threw Gallagher to the floor and pinned him there. "Five-point restraint," it was called in the KIDS program — where victims were pinned to the floor by five people in an ordeal that often lasted hours. Gaglia estimates he was restrained this way 100 times or more.

"It brought me someplace," says Gallagher, a Garfield resident. "It was like, that was the whole movie, right there."

Though some KIDS of North Jersey alumni have reported positive results, the list of horror stories — and victims claiming restitution — had grown large even before the center shut its doors in 1998, in the teeth of state investigations.

As early as 1984, "60 Minutes" had run an exposé on founder Miller Newton, the former Methodist minister who operated a number of similar franchises around the country. In 1987, then-Bergen County prosecutor Larry McClure investigated the program for nine months and urged authorities to monitor it; in 2000, The Record ran its own investigative piece.

Since closing the doors, Newton and his program have been subject to a number of lawsuits: In 1999, a Wayne woman who had been in the program six years won a \$4.5 million malpractice settlement.

"Even when I was in that place, going through all that, I was thinking, 'You know what? This is a great idea for a movie,'" Gaglia says.

For his movie, made over the past year on location in New York and New Jersey, Gaglia went back to the scene of his ordeal for crucial footage — the now-shuttered KIDS center on Seaview Drive. Not an easy thing, he says.

"I had a paranoia about even going into Jersey, or specifically Secaucus, because of what I went through," he says.

Not that Gaglia wants to paint himself as the angel of the piece.

It was his serious drug and authority problems at age 14 that led his desperate parents, as so many others had done, to seize on KIDS of North Jersey as a last best hope.

"I would stay out all night, smoke weed with my friends, come home drunk, cut school and act up to my parents," he says.

On paper, the KIDS program sounded great. The reality was something else.

Each morning at 6 a.m., Gaglia would be driven from his "host home" in the boroughs, across the George Washington Bridge in a locked car, to the rehab center in Secaucus. There, he would spend the next 12 to 16 hours in support groups that often functioned more like "restraint" groups.

"You were never left alone," he says. "When you went to the bathroom your supervisor had to hold you by your pants, which was called in their lingo 'belt looping.' When you wanted paper to wipe yourself, you had to ask permission."

But worse than all the physical abuse, Gaglia says, was the mental abuse.

"Ultimately, what they were doing was brainwashing you," Gaglia says. "They would drill it into your head that this was the only place that could keep you sober, and if your family members don't support the institution, you could never talk to them. My dad kind of turned away from the place, and they told me you can't ever talk to your father again for the rest of your life. For your sobriety."

In the end, Gaglia had to summon considerable willpower to make his escape.

He did it one Wednesday morning — on the GW Bridge.

"Before you get on the bridge ... there's a lot of stop-and-go traffic," he says. "I was in this minivan, and on the front-side passenger's seat there was no baby lock on the door. So when we got to the bridge, I sort of pushed everybody away and made it [to the front seat], and of course everybody grabbed me, but I got the door open. That's when the cops came and took me with them."

"Across the GW" has yet to open theatrically, but Gaglia says the MySpace page featuring his trailer has gotten thousands of hits — not a few from former inmates of Newton's rehab centers nationwide.

"I'm getting e-mails from people all over the world, from Australia and Canada," he says. "People are saying, thank you for making this movie. Thank you for being our voice."

On the Web:

overthegw.com

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- Caption: 1 - COLOR PHOTO - TARIQ ZEHAWI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Nick Gaglia returned to the KIDS of North Jersey rehabilitation clinic in Secaucus — where he had been abused years earlier as a teen — during filming of his movie "Over the GW." 2 - PHOTO - TARIQ ZEHAWI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Actor George Gallagher of Garfield, left, with writer-director-producer Nick Gaglia on location at the former KIDS rehab clinic.

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