

CRUELTY TAKES WARPED FORMS

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Ask Ruth Miller what kind of drugs her son Rob once took, and the list sounds like a Drug Enforcement Administration glossary. But talking about his addiction comes easier to her now, because her son has been clean for more than four years and is well on his way to the degree that will launch his career as a counselor of the next generation's "Robs."

Rob had twice washed out at Talbot Hall. Ruth said she was told, "He'll be dead in six months if you don't do something."

What she did was sign up Rob for an intense, yearlong rehabilitation program in Hebron, Ky. It required that she and her husband make the 2 1/2- hour drive to Kentucky twice a week for the duration of the program. It worked. It also inspired Ruth to become one of the founding parents of a similar program here, in Berwick, and that is where this column begins.

The local program, Kidscope, has treated 113 adolescents in its first three years, claiming a 73 percent success rate. Ruth explained that the term "success" means any youth who has remained clean and sober two years after entering the program.

Unfortunately, about a month ago, it became clear to Ruth and other members of the Kidscope board that the program was running out of money. The dilemma drew the attention of television station WSYX, and a story followed in which a Kidscope parent lamented the likely shutdown of the center.

On the morning after the story appeared, the parent featured in it received a call from a man identifying himself as filmmaker and actor Spike Lee (Do the Right Thing). He said he was calling from Port Columbus, that he had seen the story and might be able to help.

"He seemed to ask all the right questions," Ruth recalled. "He knew what he was doing."

He asked about the tax-exempt status, wanted reports on the program and provided a post office box number to which the information could be sent.

He said, "You will have your money within 30 days."

The money was \$30,000.

"At the June board meeting," Ruth said, "we made the decision that we were going to have to either raise \$30,000 or phase out the program. We decided that we would go out with dignity. We would leave with integrity, owing no money, and try to place the children in other facilities."

But here, suddenly, was an apparent savior.

Then, a few days after the material was sent to "Spike," it was returned to Kidscope marked "addressee unknown." Staffers at the center were perplexed until a call came from a man identifying himself as Lamar Jones, an aide to the filmmaker. He apologized for the incorrect address, offered another, and intimated that Spike and Sylvester Stallone likely would be visiting the rehab center soon.

"He had enough legitimacy to what he said," Ruth said, "and we were vulnerable. We wanted to believe him. It makes us look like fools, and we are not stupid people."

At one point the man called requesting that a packet of information on the program and its financial difficulties be prepared for him. He promised that a limousine would come by to pick it up. The staff waited anxiously throughout the day, but the limo never arrived.

Hopes that the program might be spared faded.

"The whole thing was a hoax," Ruth said. This she learned after asking a friend, WSYX co-anchor Michelle Gailiun, to make a few phone calls. From Spike Lee's production company in Brooklyn, Gailiun learned not only that Lee had no employee named Lamar Jones but also that the filmmaker was not in Ohio at the time the initial call was received.

At the Kidscope board meeting last Monday, trustees prepared for the worst. They had hoped it would be a meeting at which they celebrate the philanthropy of Spike Lee. Instead they were asking Kidscope contributor and Columbus accountant John Ressler if there was any way to keep from closing the program.

But even with the budgetary changes recommended by Ressler, Kidscope was in trouble.

"I think I can help you," Ruth recalled Ressler saying.

And help he did. His family made an outright gift of \$42,000 to the program, enough to keep it going.

That will probably disappoint the bogus Spike Lee. As for the real Spike Lee: Well, even a hard-nosed director likes to see a happy ending every now and then.

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