

## Teen who vowed to reform is back in jail

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- Author/Byline: JOHN GIBEAUT, Tribune Staff Writer
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Tracey ██████ promised to set her life straight this spring when a judge suspended her 10-year prison sentence for kidnapping a baby girl and stealing a car.

"I realize running isn't the answer," the 18-year-old North Port woman wrote in a letter to Sarasota Circuit Judge James Whatley.

█████ was back in jail Friday.

Sheriff's deputies charged her with stealing another car after failing to return to a facility for teen-age drug and alcohol abusers, where Whatley had sent her.

Because of that, ██████ now faces the possibility of serving a prison sentence.

"It's most unfortunate," said DeWayne Johnson, executive director of LIFE Inc. in Osprey, the rehabilitation center where ██████ has been since Whatley placed her on 10 years' probation May 2. "She had a real chance of success with our program."

The center's name used to stand for Life is for Everyone, but it now uses simply the acronym. LIFE is known for its rigorous discipline and confrontational treatment techniques.

But early on, ██████ had indicated that LIFE wasn't for her, according to a series of letters she sent Whatley from jail.

"Your honor, I am thankful that there is a good chance I won't be going to prison but, as I have said before, I don't feel the LIFE program would benefit me," ██████ said in one letter, dated March 16.

█████ was allowed to leave LIFE's campus during the day to attend classes at Manatee Community College, Johnson said.

Instead, according to sheriff's reports, she stole a purse from a Canadian tourist at about 1:30 a.m. Friday from a table in a Venice nightclub that contained keys to a rental car. ██████ was stopped driving the car about a half-hour later on U.S. Highway 41 in Sarasota, according to the reports.

She was held on \$1,500 bail in Sarasota County Jail on two theft charges.

In May, ██████ admitted in court that she took 1-year-old Morgan Skils from the girl's home last October while she was baby-sitting the child. She also admitted stealing a car from Morgan's parents, Gregg and Kelly Tappich.

█████ was arrested in mid-November in Gainesville, and the girl was returned to her parents in good health. ██████ was 17 at the time, but prosecutors charged her as an adult.

She had admitted taking the son of her father's girlfriend in a similar manner three times and running away from home at least 10 times, according to court records. Her juvenile record includes charges of kidnapping, burglary and theft.

But Whatley gave ██████ a chance.

Besides suspending the prison sentence, the judge agreed to withhold a formal finding of guilt - thus sparing ██████ a permanent adult record - if she successfully completed the LIFE program.

Whatley declined comment Friday.

Assistant State Attorney Charley Roberts said he hadn't reviewed the latest case and was unable to comment. ██████ attorney, Assistant Public Defender Larry Eger, couldn't be reached.

Despite ██████ letters to the judge, Johnson said she was doing well enough in the LIFE program that she was being considered for a move from the restricted six-acre campus to a private home.

"I do not know why she left the program," Johnson said. "You'd have to ask her."

█████ wrote Whatley that the time she spent in jail waiting for her case to end should have been sufficient.

"I feel that six months here plus 10 years of probation is enough to teach me my lesson, which I have already learned," █████ said in the March 16 letter.

"I would be on probation until I was 28," she said. "I'm quite sure that's enough to keep me in line. . . . I don't want to be in a program geared for alcohol or drug abusers or potential abusers because I've never had that problem in almost 18 years, and I'm sure I never will."

Johnson said that despite the latest arrest, he would take █████ back i the program if the courts allow.

"We'd certainly extend that opportunity to her," Johnson said.

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