

LINGERING TORMENT FROM ROUGH THERAPY - DRUG PROGRAM ALUMNI REBUILDING THEIR LIVES

Record, The (Hackensack, NJ) (Published as The Record (New Jersey)) - April 9, 2000

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- Edition: All Editions
- Section: NEWS
- Page: A1

It has been almost seven years since Rebecca Ehrlich walked out of KIDS of North Jersey, a drug treatment center no longer operating. On her bad days, though, it feels as if she was there just yesterday.

Ehrlich says she still has nightmares about being trapped in a virtual prison, first in Hackensack, then Secaucus, that barred her from going to school, reading books, getting mail, or making phone calls for most of her six years there. She was allowed to see her parents only twice a week across a crowded room.

When Ehrlich finally got out of KIDS at age 21, she sued for medical malpractice, charging that the unqualified staff never recognized her mental illness and that the program actually made her worse. In December, she won a settlement of \$4.5 million.

"I'm happy about the money, but if I could give it all away not to be sick I would," said Ehrlich, a 27-year-old from Wayne who has been hospitalized for bipolar disorder 17 times since leaving KIDS. "I was tortured emotionally and mentally there."

Ehrlich is one of the many KIDS survivors who say they still have deep scars from a round-the-clock behavior modification program that instilled fear and self-loathing in its troubled clients. Hundreds of North Jersey teenagers spent months or years there until it closed under fire from state regulators in late 1998.

Critics today and throughout KIDS' existence condemned it as a cult-like boot camp headed by a charismatic leader named **Miller Newton**. Now 62 and living in Florida, he has worked as a psychologist and is easing into retirement. **Newton**, who declined to talk for this article, still has ardent supporters who credit him with rescuing out-of-control delinquents from the streets.

In a 1987 letter to The Record, **Newton** explained that his program took "walking disaster area kids . . . and turns them into winners." His boosters contended that bogus allegations of abuse came from "druggies" who couldn't handle the discipline necessary for sobriety.

Despite the official demise of KIDS, the program remains a powerful force in the lives of its former clients. It left broken spirits and broken families in its wake. To this day, some families remain divided into two camps, a side that has faith in **Newton** and a side that is horrified by him.

Bob Moss of Ridgewood knows how deeply some families have been split. His grown son won't talk to him.

Moss was an administrator at KIDS but quit in 1993 when he became skeptical of **Newton's** tough-love approach. After that, Moss says his son, a former KIDS client who is believed to be loyal to **Newton**, rejected his pleas for contact for seven years. (Moss' son could not be reached for comment.)

"**Miller** and his people told my son I was a bad person, and that his involvement with me would lead to his returning to drug use," Moss said with evident pain. "I understand I have two grandchildren I've never seen."

Other parents face similar estrangement. One Bergen couple, who spoke on condition of anonymity, says their daughter hasn't talked to them in three years.

Like many KIDS parents, the couple believed in the program at first but were dismayed to find that it grew more coercive. They enrolled their daughter in 1984 and, like many patients, she eventually joined the staff. She is still devoted to **Newton**, her father and others who know her say, and she runs a "graduate society" from her Bergen County apartment, where **Newton** followers meet daily and practice the techniques they learned.

She turned against her parents when they asked for an independent psychiatric evaluation of her condition, the couple said. "She does not want us to talk to her because we are the enemy," said her father, a former school psychologist. "I am absolutely desperate to see her."

His daughter did not return calls for comment.

Newton's supporters call KIDS a treatment of last resort that used peer pressure to straighten out teenagers who didn't respond to traditional therapies. At times more than 100 teenagers were enrolled, sent by parents desperate for help.

"The program was good for many kids," said Zisalo Wancier, who worked with the program four hours a week and was one of four Bergen County psychiatrists named as co-defendants in Ehrlich's lawsuit. "Many of these kids were doing better. They were all sober. . . . So the public was being protected."

Newton "saved my daughter's life," said a Bergen County man who asked not to be named. Like six other people said to be Newton admirers who were contacted for this story, he would not discuss KIDS in detail, and he said the biased media always criticized it unfairly.

Some graduates say KIDS began with good intentions but that Newton became far too controlling. "I'm sober and I give KIDS credit," said 31-year-old ██████ Harding, who lived in Montclair and now lives in Bethlehem, Pa. He enrolled in 1984, joined the staff, and quit volunteering for it two years ago. "It took me off the streets so I wouldn't get high," he said, "but I wasn't allowed to move on."

Meanwhile, state regulators still want money back from Newton. The New Jersey Department of Human Services is suing him to recoup more than \$1 million in Medicaid payments he collected.

According to a stinging report last September by Administrative Law Judge Daniel McKeown, who denied Newton's appeal to be eligible for Medicaid funds, KIDS was never approved to provide the full-time care it dispensed. The report said it lacked qualified staff. It violated clients' rights by using them to restrain each other physically. And it blocked them from communicating with their parents.

Court papers and people who attended KIDS described it as a warehouse where "newcomers" would sit on blue chairs in a large group for 12 hours a day, confessing their mistakes and chanting about honesty, sexual abstinence, and kicking drugs. Newcomers were not trusted to be alone or talk to their parents privately. More experienced "oldcomers" followed them everywhere, holding on to their belt loops. They were even watched in the bathroom and the shower.

Former KIDS clients say one of the techniques used on teens who acted up was the "five-point restraint" - five peers would sit on a client's arms and legs and hold his head still. Sometimes that punishment lasted for hours.

Although teenagers spent the nights in "host homes" run by other clients' parents, they were also watched constantly there and many said they felt they had no escape. They said staff members convinced them that if they left they would overdose or their parents would send them back.

Moreover, clients talked of psychological manipulation. They said Newton convinced their parents that teenagers who quit would be lost to the gutters.

"A lot of parents just didn't know what to do, and they wound up in effect civilly committing these children without the due process of law," said Barbara Waugh, a deputy attorney general who is arguing the state's Medicaid suit against Newton. "Once you got in there, you couldn't get out."

Newton, a former Methodist minister, has long faced media scrutiny and opposition from state regulators. In 1984, for example, "60 Minutes" aired an exposé on a similar drug program he ran in St. Petersburg, Fla.

In 1987, Larry McClure, the Bergen County prosecutor at the time, led a nine-month investigation of KIDS. He found no evidence of criminal activity, but he urged state authorities to monitor it. In a raid in 1990, McClure marched into the Hackensack center and announced that he would escort out anyone who wanted to go. Twelve teenagers left on the spot.

One was named Jeff. Riddled by self-doubt, he returned to KIDS the next day because he was terrified that the staff's prediction would come true: that without their guidance, he would commit suicide. "I went back because I was in complete fear," he said. Eventually Jeff left for good. Now he's a mortgage broker.

Jeff and some other former KIDS clients who are cobbling their lives back together have become an informal support group.

Six of them met for a hamburger dinner one night at a Hackensack diner. All are in therapy for post-traumatic stress or other problems. All are drug-free, too. They thank Alcoholics Anonymous and other rehabilitation programs, not Newton. Since KIDS' 24-hour supervision kept teenagers out of high school, they had to get general equivalency diplomas. Some went to college.

One 31-year-old, now a health professional in Bergen County, said that when she finally left KIDS she was furious with her parents for sending her there and had to work hard to reconcile with them. "We fought and cried," she said. "My parents felt very guilty. They said they didn't know what was going on there.

"I feel very angry that nobody saved us," she said. "I have dreams that I'm going to work or school and I'm looking over my shoulder, and the program is coming to kidnap me."

"I have to take medication because I think I'm always lying," added a 32-year-old social worker from Teaneck. "At KIDS, if you said, 'I feel hurt,' they said, 'Are you really hurt?' I'm still asking myself these questions, and not believing myself."

While they are heartened by Rebecca Ehrlich's legal victory against KIDS, some of the revelations that came out because of the litigation

reopened old wounds for survivors.

██████ Auerbach, a blond and gregarious 31-year-old office manager from Clifton, said she "freaked out" when she learned later that Newton was not a licensed psychologist when he began to treat her.

He always went by the name "Dr. Newton," but his first Ph.D. was in anthropology from the Union Institute in Cincinnati, an alternative distance-learning program. He got a doctorate in neuropsychology from that school in 1993. According to the state Division of Consumer Affairs, he got a New Jersey psychologist's license in 1995, 11 years after he opened KIDS of North Jersey (originally called KIDS of Bergen County).

"After reading Rebecca's court papers, I learned somebody without a license diagnosed me," Auerbach said. "So was I really an alcoholic and drug addict, or was that just put in my head? . . . I have 15 years of sobriety. I function in the world. I have a good boyfriend and drive a fancy car. But inside I'm empty and falling apart, and nobody knows it."

Why did families keep their children in such an environment?

"Kids never had the opportunity to tell their parents what was really going on there," said Harryet Ehrlich, Rebecca's mother. "We were all brainwashed. We believed in Miller Newton, and we were so desperate for help we thought this was the solution."

Ehrlich's lawyer, Philip Elberg, said news of her success has spurred at least a dozen other former clients to call him to see if they can sue, too. For most, it's too late. He is still considering cases, however, if they fall within the statute of limitations. A plaintiff must file suit within two years of the offense or, in the case of an underage victim, by age 20.

The future may hold some bright spots for Rebecca Ehrlich. She hopes improved medications and good doctors will help stabilize her mental illness. The settlement will pay for an apartment where she can live on her own when she's doing well, and provide an annuity to support her.

These days she is taking one course at a time to get an associate's degree at Bergen Community College, but she has no idea what kind of job she wants.

"I have my good days and my bad days," she said as she leaned back on a couch in her parents' house, with her Shih Tzu, Mazel, at her feet. "I'm doing better than when I first got out of KIDS. . . . It makes me angry that I went through all that. I feel sad it took that many years of my life away."

(SIDEBAR, page a16)

'Incredible' KIDS case took over lawyer's life -

Rebecca Ehrlich's malpractice suit against KIDS of North Jersey was settled in December, just 11 days before it was scheduled for trial in Superior Court in Hudson County.

The \$4.5 million settlement came after Ehrlich's lawyer, Philip Elberg, spent five years wrangling to get her medical records from KIDS and deposing witnesses to unravel what really happened there.

"This case took over my life," said Elberg, who is based in Newark. "I got sucked in because the kids' stories are so incredible."

Ehrlich's suit against KIDS' director, Miller Newton, also named as defendants four Bergen County psychiatrists who worked there part time: Zisalo Wancier in Closter, Raymond Edelman in Teaneck, and two others who settled on condition that they not be named. One has died, and the other is no longer practicing medicine.

In settling the case, the defendants did not admit any guilt. Elberg said their malpractice insurance carriers paid \$2 million on behalf of Newton, \$1 million for Edelman, and \$500,000 for Wancier. The other two psychiatrists' insurance paid the remaining \$1 million.

Elberg said the presence of the psychiatrists gave Newton credibility, but that the doctors never evaluated her properly or treated Ehrlich during her six years at KIDS.

According to Ehrlich's suit, Newton admitted under oath that "during the first years she was his patient, she was not examined by anyone with any license at all in the treatment of psychiatric or mental disorders."

Ehrlich's family says she never had a substance abuse problem, but she was extremely obstinate and sometimes violent. She began to show signs of trouble at age 7 and went to several therapists before landing at KIDS, where Newton labeled her as suffering from "compulsive behavior disorder." After she left, a New York psychologist diagnosed her as having bipolar disorder, formerly called manic-depressive illness.

In court papers, Newton's lawyer argued that there was no proof that KIDS aggravated Ehrlich's condition. He said her parents could have

removed her at any time, that they were aware of the program's use of restraints, and that they did not object.

According to data Elberg culled from KIDS records, Ehrlich was held in restraints 138 times, but her parents were notified only four times.

The psychiatrists have their own defenses.

Edelman's court papers say that the Ehrlichs didn't ask him to evaluate their daughter. Since he worked at KIDS only eight hours a week, he depended on families and staff to alert him to problems.

Wancier said he became medical director in 1992 after Ehrlich was temporarily discharged. He signed one of her old charts even though he had not met her because of a paperwork backlog. He said that when Ehrlich returned to the program, nobody advised him. He worked there only four to six hours per week.

Wancier said in an interview that he "didn't feel comfortable" signing paperwork for patients he hadn't met but that he was new in the job and didn't want to say no to **Newton**. "That was my own foolishness," he said. "I failed, but the program was good for many kids."

- Caption: PHOTO - KLAUS-PETER STEITZ / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Rebecca Ehrlich recently won a \$4.5 million settlement of a lawsuit against a controversial drug treatment program. "I'm happy about the money, but if I could give it all away not to be sick I would," she said.
- Memo: `INCREDIBLE' KIDS CASE TOOK OVER LAWYER'S LIFE

- Index terms: YOUTH; DRUG; HOME; HEALTH; LAWSUIT
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