

Testimony of Jon Martin-Crawford

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Community Alliance for the Fair and Ethical Treatment of Youth

Committee on Education and Labor hearing on
“Child Abuse and Deceptive Marketing by Residential Programs for Teens”
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I would like to thank the Chairman and the Committee for the opportunity to present my side of this story. After watching the hearing back in October, I was inspired by the clear case of morality that brought together both sides of the aisle in this discussion.

We have been called “noisy complainers” we have been called “manipulating troublemakers.” After over 10 years, I finally have my chance to speak. My name is Jon Martin-Crawford. I was locked up at the NATSAP affiliated program, The Family Foundation School, in Hancock, NY, from 1995 to 1997.

My life at home was anything but stable. This caused me to seek my own release from it all. I created a persona for myself at school, the troublemaker, always looking for the attention I didn't get at home. Involved in drugs by the age of 13, I was lost. I was constantly in trouble, and in a lot of fights. Bomb scares, drugs, suspensions and expulsions from school certainly had my parents worried, at wit's end, and desperate for a solution. My only release was my music, my writing, and my skateboarding. After being expelled from public school and one private school for marijuana and writing an underground newspaper, my parents sent me to The Family shortly thereafter. Here, they thought, after touring the facility, I would get better, and be able to live a normal life again. They thought this was the best thing they could be doing for me...for our family.

Once I arrived at The Family, I knew I was there until I was 18. I hated my parents at that point and tried to leave, until three 6foot plus 250lb plus men forced me to sit and I saw that I had no choice. I went through what seems like the ritualistic stripping of clothes, self and identity almost all of us survivors faced. My clothes were taken and thrown away. My music, my art, my skateboard all destroyed. What I didn't have with me, my parents were told to destroy as well. I was left with only a letter from my mother for the next 3 months.

I had been to some inpatient settings before, but this one was different. Other places allowed phone calls, mail, and peer communication. Here, I wasn't even allowed to call home the first few months. Even after that, I only got that one phone call home a week...nothing more... no access to Child Protective Services. Here I was only allowed to talk to staff and kids that had been there more than 6 months. I was told I was denying the extent of my drug use, and I was confused as to just how I would “get better” enough to just see my family. I sat and watched, and learned to play the game of lies necessary to get privileges, and eventually get out. I got lucky and figured these rules out quickly

enough to not endure what I saw many kids endure. But I still witnessed it all.

Including:

- 1 Staff punching students in the face while restraining.....not once but several times
- 2 Typical restraint procedures were wrapping kids up in Duct tape and blankets. Kids were not let out of this wrap, even to use the bathroom, feminine hygiene, or just to move around and let the body out of the confinement, while in an isolation room (the 6X6 library room)
- 3 Restraints were not only done by faculty, but many senior and junior members of students. Usually, this was even more brutal and was often done in front of all other students to show “what will happen if you act out”
- 4 Kids forced to eat food they were allergic to, and keep eating even if vomiting as a result.
- 5 Kids as young as 12 being taken out of school to carry out pointless manual labor such as shovel manure, carry wheelbarrows of rocks, sweeping the roof, etc. for days on end
- 6 When kids tried to run away it was again, not only staff, but many students told to chase, tackle, restrain, and bring them back.
- 7 Many things heard from staff, berating kids with high level verbal abuse, often of a highly derogatory and sexual nature, at times regarding sexual orientation
- 8 An admitted sex addict was one of the high-up faculty and counselors, as well as a dorm monitor living above the boy’s dorm

The rules I learned to avoid much of these problems were as follows:

- 1 make up a horrible past to “cure yourself of”...our moral inventory was nearly always fabricated to make our problems seem worse, and the program seem like salvation
- 2 Tell on yourself and your peers for things you may have never done to give the illusion you’re getting better
- 3 if you have certain “gifts” you can find ways to skate by. Me, I was the school’s golden boy with my pen and my graduation speech, as well as others were used as propaganda at graduations as part of “family day” for all parents to hear.
- 4 Under no circumstances tell your parents or prospective parents the truth about what you see happening.

Yes, I was fortunate enough to go home once a month after a while. All I wanted for those weekends at home was to sleep, relax, and watch television. I quickly learned that telling our parents the truth about what happened at The Family would only be explained

away as manipulation and we would lose our privileges.

While I had been fortunate enough to miss out on most of the horrors personally, I unfortunately gave many tours to prospective parents, always omitting the details of restraints, punishments, and lack of any sort of communication or safeguards against the abuses that took place. As a dorm leader, I was told to wake up one of the kids in my dorm with the light from the lamp...that only had a flood light as a bulb...burning his retina. I participated in the restraining, and took part in the barrage of verbal attacks just as did many of my peers. I am not proud of this, but we had no choice in any of this. If we did not conform, we were "being negative" and subject to the same treatment and lack of privileges.

Once I left, however, I saw that I was now in the real world with real problems again, and the school had never helped me with those problems. After nightmares of The Family led to a relapse, I was soon out of Vassar College and into the military. The training in the military, although viewed by some to be harsh, was a cakewalk compared to the hell endured at The Family School. My trust issues were never resolved after leaving The Family, and the nightmares remained. Ultimately, all these psychological flashbacks led to the need for my discharge from the Army, something I regret to this day.

For years, I thought all this was my fault. While the nightmares and anxiety never wore off, getting high made it go away again. I will not blame others for my choices, my mistakes. I take responsibility for those. What I do blame The Family for is stripping me of my childhood. I still have nightmares of being locked up and told I'm ruining my life. I still read the monthly paper of lies the school puts out and get nauseous remembering the stuff we witnessed.

The only thing I can say to temper my disdain for these types of schools, or at least for The Family is this:

While the programs, as they are, have little positive effect long term, I do believe that kids in my position need some sort of help. I do believe there can be a safe solution, as some staff are genuinely decent and caring people. We need oversight and regulation of these facilities with swift and severe penalties for those who stray from the standards.

What must be remembered through all of this is that the "success stories" of programs tend to fall in the one to two year range after leaving such program...and usually are the opinions of parents. A true statistic? Of the 25 kids from my graduating class and the one prior to mine, maybe 4 remained sober. While many can now say they live successful lives, it came anywhere between 5-10 years after leaving the program and figuring out life on their own with psychiatric help. Unfortunately, this cannot be said for all.

The programs are quick to take credit for a successful story, and are just as fast to claim anyone that doesn't make it just "didn't work the program" The truth? The nightmares and psychological scars of being dragged from your home to a place in the middle of nowhere, restrained in blankets and duct tape, assaulted, verbally and physically....those

scars and that trauma never go away.

For my parents, who thought that my time at The Family was the best thing they could do, I hope they understand I do not blame them for what I've been through. I know the pain I put them through, and the desperation they faced. I know they did what they thought would help me the most. They were lied to, or at least not told the whole truth...it was not their fault. I know it's hard to tell sometimes, but it was not bad parenting that led to this decision. It was good parenting and deceptive tours and marketing. While I may have received a more focused education, every other part of my teenage life, and early adult life, was stunted as a result of my time at The Family. Fortunately, today, my relationship with my family is better than it's ever been. I have the mutual respect of both my parents despite our differences in opinion at times. While this topic often causes some pain, I know that what they chose was out of love. What they got was something they never could have imagined...or believed until now.

For my friends who have since died from suicide, and still suffer the nightmares, our time and our voice will not be in vain. There comes a time for every man to make amends and right their wrongs. This is a lesson these programs preach, and it is a lesson they must now follow.