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Homes operating without state oversight

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By **ALEXANDRA ZAYAS**,
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Lighthouse of Northwest Florida, Jay - Status: FACCCA-accredited

At this Christian reform school, teen girls are not allowed to wear pants and can be punished for looking someone in the eye at the wrong moment or for using words like “yeah” and “cool.”

The state has investigated Lighthouse for abuse 13 times, most recently in 2011. It found evidence only once, of inadequate supervision.

Girls at Lighthouse may go for months unable to contact their parents. Bad behavior sometimes lands them in the “Room of Grace,” a small, barren room where children are kept in isolation almost every waking hour. Four former students interviewed by the Tampa Bay Times said they knew of girls sent to isolation daily for more than a month - an allegation school officials deny. The head pastor, Russell Cookston, said girls are confined for days, never weeks.

A dozen recent residents interviewed by the Times also described a system of discipline in which girls are called upon to physically restrain other girls by pinning them to the ground. They call it “flooring.” The pastor says peer involvement in restraint is minimal.

Lindsay Brooks, 20:

“They sat on me like I was their mattress and they were having a slumber party,” said Brooks, who girls recall was “floored” repeatedly in 2007 and 2008, by six to seven girls, sometimes, for hours. “My body would go numb after a while.”

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Camp Tracey, Glen St. Mary

Status: FACCCA-accredited

Police have been called to the facility more than 50



'THEY SAT ON ME:' Lindsay Brooks, shown with mother Michelle Brooks at their home in St. Petersburg, was “floored” by other girls while at Lighthouse of Northwest Florida.

times in the past decade, most often to track down children who ran away. Some of them disappeared for several weeks or showed up on the other side of the state.

The co-ed program focuses on outdoor work and relies on paddling and other forms of corporal punishment. Children there in recent years say they have been made to “crab walk,” carry two 5-gallon buckets full of dirt, swallow soap and eat the cigarettes they were caught smoking.

DCF has investigated the school 22 times since the 1980s and found evidence of abuse in a third of the cases.

The school’s founder, Pastor Wilford McCormick, declined to be interviewed.

Sequoyah Ozorowsky, 20:

Ozorowsky said camp staff placed a videocamera in the room when DCF came to ask questions. “They wanted to make sure DCF wasn’t manipulating the kids,” he said. “Some people say that there’s people that deserve to go to hell. I wouldn’t wish something like this on anybody.”

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Marvelous Grace, Pace

Status: Unaccredited

On the old grounds of New Beginnings, Marvelous Grace Girls Academy is run by a street preacher once photographed outside a bar holding a sign about Sodom with a fellow protester who was dressed like Satan. Girls describe a program similar to New Beginnings, where teens are expected to strictly follow

fundamentalist Christian ideals.

Marvelous Grace does not have a state license, does not have a religious exemption through FACCCA and is not accredited as a boarding school. By law, the school has three years to get accredited. The school's leader, Steven Blankenship, said the school would be accredited by January 2013.

In 2010, Santa Rosa County sheriff's deputies came upon two scratched and sunburned runaways who told them Blankenship had called them "faggots" and "bastards," forced them to street preach and shut girls who weren't "preaching hard enough" in a van. They threatened suicide if taken back to the school. DCF investigated and found no evidence to support their claims.

Chris Hicks, 29:

Hicks was a student from 1998 to 2002 when, he alleges, he was sodomized by a former staff member mentioned in other lawsuits. He says he has retained an attorney to pursue his own case. "He kind of held me down and told me to be quiet, not to say anything," he said of the staff member. "I was more worried about the physical abuse than the sexual abuse. I could handle the sexual abuse. I could handle it out of fear."