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**NEVER FORGET:** Samson Lehman, now 20, displays the tattoo he got to show he is a survivor and to remember his near-death experience after he was forced to perform extreme exercise at Gateway Academy in Bonifay in 2008. He suffered kidney and liver failure.

## On the brink of death

THERE IS THE AMERICAN JUSTICE SYSTEM, and then, there is this: An honors student is manhandled by a felon and sent somewhere the state can't legally send the worst of its foster kids.

By **ALEXANDRA ZAYAS**  
*Times Staff Writer*

Samson Lehman lay in a hospital bed with quarter-sized blisters on his feet and a patch of raw skin on his face, plugged into a machine filtering the blood the 15-year-old's kidneys could not.

It was March 6, 2008, 10 days after he entered a Christian boot camp, seven days after he took off in a helicopter, hearing the word dialysis.

His uncle held a camera, asking for answers.

This is what Samson said:

On Feb. 24, a Sunday night, his mother took him to her new boyfriend's house, where she said she needed to wait for a friend. Samson walked out to find a stranger blocking his way:

"Sit in the chair, son. ... Your mother loves you, it's for your own good."

Samson says his mom's boyfriend emerged and threatened him with duct tape, put him in a choke hold, slammed him and sat on him.

Samson looked up, struggling to breathe, and saw

his mom with her arms folded, watching.

There is the American justice system, and then, there is this: An honors student is manhandled by a felon and sent somewhere the state can't legally send the worst of its foster kids.

Not because Samson did drugs or got drunk; his mother had no proof of that. Or because he was a criminal; teachers found him polite and responsible, and he had no juvenile record.

But because his older brother had gone to jail and she had heard rumors Samson had been seen drinking.

In her sons, Laura Ketchem sees the men of her past. Bad genes, she said. Samson, she believed, had them, too.

"Stand at attention," a camouflaged man at the Gateway Christian Military Academy, also known as Teen Challenge, told Samson. "Give me 20 laps."

It was 7:20 a.m. He was tired after the eight-hour ride north to Bonifay. He needed to brush his teeth.

Instead, Samson ran around the bunkhouse. He did 15 laps but failed to “sound off,” so he got 20 more, then jumping jacks, then push-ups.

When another new “cadet” showed up, Samson had to join in that boy’s exercises, too. More boys came. Samson lost track of the laps.

Boys held cups the size of Big Gulps, but couldn’t drink until told to “consume.” They ate lunch standing up, ate dinner standing up, were led to the showers, but made to exercise there.

Samson collapsed. Men forced him to the ground, pulled his hands behind his back and his elbows up. Samson felt both pain and relief.

For the first time all day, he wasn’t standing.

Samson got to use the bathroom. He peed a stream so dark red, it looked black.

He reported it, but heard: “Everybody usually pisses blood the first couple of days.”

Monday night, Samson slept fitfully between push-ups. He spent Tuesday night vomiting.

For more than 72 hours, Samson said he went without a healthy night’s sleep, and in that time, was dragged with his cheek scraping the ground, tossed in a corner and called “useless,” made to sleep in his sweaty jumpsuit and allowed to change only after he defecated himself.

He was taken to the emergency room, his doctor would later write to an investigator, on the brink of death.

In the hospital, Samson’s mother gave up on raising her son. “If I’m such a sh---- parent,” she remembers telling her father, “you do it.” Samson went home from the hospital with his grandfather.

Ketchem said she spent four years assuming her son was at fault, believing he dehydrated himself by refusing to drink water or by crying too much, like the toddler who howled during haircuts.

She never asked for the Sheriff’s Office report, which cited students and staff who watched Samson



Courtesy of Samson Lehman

**KIDNEY FAILURE AND DIALYSIS:** As Samson Lehman lay in a hospital bed in 2008, he talked of being forced to exercise at a religious home until he collapsed. He spoke of vomiting and urinating blood. The “cadet” was an honors student. He had no juvenile record. He was 15.

vomit, fall and turn yellow. But hearing it read recently, she wondered if she had misjudged her son.

“Had I known they were doing such unreasonable stuff,” she said, “I would not have sent him.”

Ketchem said she feels “a little guilty.” But that subsides when she remembers the “positive” side of it all: “It took him almost dying to get his head out of his a--.”

No, Samson says, it didn’t.

He spent months in dialysis, thinking.

“Just sitting on that machine and knowing it was completely avoidable,” Samson said. “That was extremely frustrating....

“I would just get so mad.... And then, I don’t know, you just feel kind of, like, helpless.”

He is now 20, majoring in engineering at the University of Florida. Not because of his time away, he said. In spite of it.

Freshman year, he got a tattoo to commemorate his survival, to symbolize he was not a powerless victim, or the pawn of some greater order, but a man who would dictate his own fate:

*Sum Mihi Dominus. I am my own master.*