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In God's name | Last of three parts.

SIN WON'T BE TOLERATED at a home to reform troubled girls where faith and punishment intermingle. Parents are promised an oasis. Young women who lived there tell a different story.

Locked away from sin

STORIES BY ALEXANDRA ZAYAS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHLEEN FLYNN • TIMES

Lighthouse of Northwest Florida offers refuge to parents terrified of losing their daughters to the tempest of a sinful world.

It promises an oasis where teenagers wear nylons and say "yes, ma'am," where Scripture is sung and words are spoken only in turn.

Alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, self-mutilation, eating disorders - the reform home approaches all ills with heavy doses of punishment and God.

The home's doors lock shut, to keep the girls in, and the sin out.

But within that isolation, strange things happen.

Girls say they have been ordered to tackle, pin down and sit on their out-of-control peers. They describe being confined to a time-out room the size of a walk-in closet, almost every waking hour, for days at a time.

Police reports filed over the years give glimpses of desperation. A girl slits her wrists with a razor blade. One grabs a butter knife. One tries to make a noose with her tights.

A girl bangs her head on the floor, screaming of murder and suicide, telling a police officer, "I will find a way to kill myself if you don't get me out of here."

Much of what goes on inside remains secret.

Lighthouse is one of about two dozen children's homes shielded from state oversight under a religious exemption created by Florida lawmakers in 1984. The homes are closed to state licensing officials and monitored instead by the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a private nonprofit organization whose inspection records are not made public.

Russell Cookston, head pastor at Lighthouse, offered no religious justification for restraining girls or putting them in isolation. He first said those measures were rare and used only to calm girls who were endangering others.

However, he went on to describe how multiple-day sentences in the Room of Grace are handed out on a sliding scale depending on the "offense" a girl committed.

Restraint and isolation, he said, are the last resort. They are followed by counseling sessions. The goal, he said, is to have a "therapeutic rapport."

"When a child goes ballistic they can do a lot of damage," Cookston said. "That's the last thing that we



BIBLICAL FOUNDATION: Girls listen to a sermon during a service at Lighthouse of Northwest Florida on Aug. 9. Girls pledge allegiance to the American flag, the Bible and the Christian flag.

want."

What he wants, Cookston said, is for girls to learn how to be polite and do what they're told.

"We want them to get to the point that parents can work with them again. ...

"God actually put the program together," he said. "We're teaching his word and that never changes. ...

"It's a liberal world. And we show them how they can live conservatively."

God's program

A two-lane road slices through the cotton and peanut fields of Jay, a one-stoplight farm town in the western end of the Panhandle, just south of Alabama.

For two decades, girls from as far as California have found themselves here, following a long driveway toward a manicured compound, unaware of what awaits them in their minimum 12-month stay.

The home had fewer than 20 girls when the Times visited in August. Monthly tuition is \$1,500 paid for privately by parents and donations. The home advertises for girls as young as 10.

Most days at Lighthouse start before sunrise and are filled with self-directed study and sermons. Girls pledge allegiance to the American flag, the Bible and the Christian flag.

The home is clean, the pantry well-stocked. On Friday nights, girls play games like balloon volleyball. "We bring students in here that are trying to be older than they really are, trying to have their body cash checks that they can't right now," Cookston said. "To

be a kid again is refreshing.”

Little filters in. No radio, no TV, no Internet.

Girls who behave get their first phone conversation with parents 90 days in; calls are monitored, letters reviewed. Girls who break the rules - which include uttering the words “yeah” or “cool” - must copy hundreds of lines from the Bible.

Reach 5,000 lines and you’re on detention, stripped of privileges like shaving, speaking and making eye contact, former residents say.

It is not uncommon for girls to have to work off tens of thousands of lines before they can get off restriction, though Cookston says in the past three years, he has sometimes granted “grace,” resetting punishment to a goal with a realistic end.

Good girls rise in the ranks to become “helpers.” Troublemakers are isolated, or worse.

Tackled and floored

In 2007, Lindsay Brooks was a 15-year-old with a neurological condition she could not control. She was prone to violent outbursts and her mother had run out of options.

Brooks, of St. Petersburg, had been in and out of treatment in four different counties. None was like Lighthouse, where Brooks said she was gang-tackled and sat on by as many as six girls at a time.

The Times interviewed a dozen residents who spent time at Lighthouse in the past five years, 10 of them in the past two. Those who went on the record: Ali Reichle, Allie Crawford, Brittani Stoffregen, Cheyenne Homminga, Hannah Kilfoyle, Felisha Ibanez, Jennifer McKee, Jessica Albanes, Lindsay Brooks and Rachel Beaton.

Some said they benefited from the program.

All described a practice in which the same troubled girls the program sets out to help are used to restrain others.

Some recall “flooring” sessions that lasted an hour or longer, with helpers having to switch out in shifts, even after the legs of the girl beneath them had begun to numb and purple.

Residents at Lighthouse when Brooks was there in 2007 and 2008 recall her being floored frequently, by six to seven other girls, sometimes for hours.

“Six girls sitting on top of you is like those silent movies where they’re running through the park and they stop under a window and a piano is dropped on top of them,” said Brooks, now 20. “Your body is functioning the way it should be, then bam, you’ve got, like, 3,000 pounds on you....”

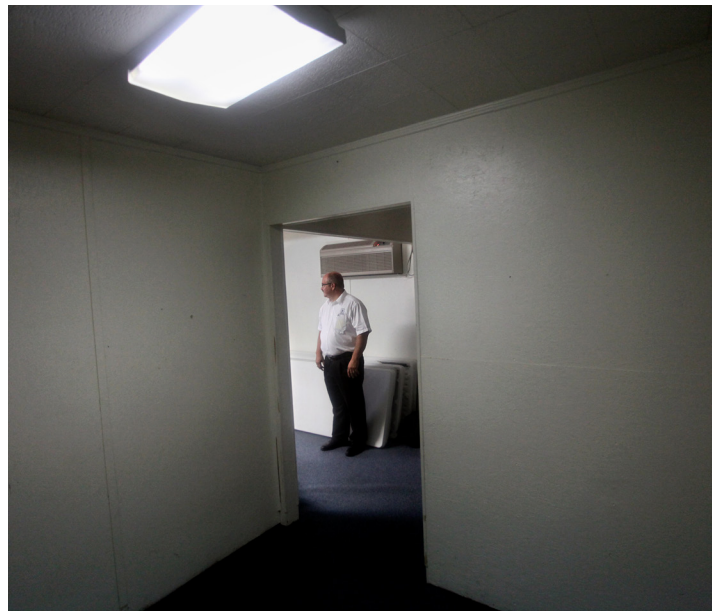
“You could take little tiny breaths, because there was so much weight on you.”

Girls recall others being floored not only for violence, but for walking away or giving attitude.

Rachel Beaton, now 20, said she was once floored for crying too loud. “When they get off of you, your body is so numb. I used to have bruises on my ribs, my hip bones.”

One allegation about flooring is documented in a 2008 Santa Rosa County Sheriff’s Office report. Parents showed up at the station with a daughter who had a human bite mark on her leg, an injury she said she sustained while restraining a disobedient girl.

When DCF investigated, Cookston said the girls restrained each other on their own, not at the direction



LIGHTHOUSE OF NORTHWEST FLORIDA: Pastor Russell Cookston stands outside the “Room of Grace,” where girls are isolated as punishment. The home is in a one-stoplight town south of Alabama.

of the home.

Cookston repeated that explanation even after the Times told him former residents said they had been ordered by adults to tackle or sit on other girls.

Cheyenne Homminga said she was made to physically “put down” other girls when she was at Lighthouse from January 2011 to January 2012. The 15-year-old said she was given the task because she was bigger than the others.

“They wanted you to sit on their thighs and then to hold with your hands their hands on their back,” she said. “It’s never like you lightly hold their hands together. You’re really violent and you’re forcing them. ... I hated putting girls down. A bunch of the girls didn’t like me anymore.”

“I never wanted to hurt them.

“But it was like I had to, I was commanded to.”

Robert Friedman, a psychologist and professor emeritus at the University of South Florida Department of Child and Family Studies, said the practice described by former residents is harmful to everyone involved. It makes the girl on the floor angrier and adds to the sense that she’s worthless, he said.

“The act of holding down a friend, a bunk mate, a roommate, it leaves the youngsters feeling bad about themselves,” he said. “It turns them against each other instead of creating a supportive peer environment where they help each other and they listen to each other.”

‘A disgusting little box.’

After a girl is floored, her likely destination is a white, windowless cell called the “Room of Grace.”

The room, the size of a small bathroom or walk-in closet, has no bed, no chairs, just a thin carpet for girls confined all day, from the time they wake until bed.

Former residents complain they would be held there for days, with limited bathroom breaks, nothing to do and no one to talk to.

Other girls, they said, had soiled the carpet, out of necessity or spite.

“It was a disgusting little box,” 18-year-old Ali Reichle said. “Whenever you walked in that room, you could smell just the puke and the urine.”

The makeshift cell has an opening where a door

would have hung. When a girl is banished, the opening is blocked with a table and manned by someone who makes sure the troublemaker stays put. Cookston said an adult is always present; residents said girls were often watched over by other children.

When the Times visited in August, the room was barren, the only sign of its purpose walls scarred by years of punches. There was no smell.

On the wall just outside the empty doorjamb, officials have hung an inspirational poster - Oh, cheer up!

The irony is not lost on girls who passed through Lighthouse. Many say they spent hours stuck in the room, seething and being forced to listen to taped evangelical sermons:

“There was yelling in them,” recalled 16-year-old Allie Crawford. “Some girls would plug their ears. Some girls would kick walls. I was definitely sick of it.”

Even a few days in isolation is unacceptable, experts say.

“Incredibly abusive,” Friedman said. “Absolutely, totally inappropriate.”

Five former residents recall girls being confined for more than a week at a time. Four said they remember girls who were kept away for more than a month.

Cookston denied such lengthy stays. He said the worst offenses net a girl three days in the room, and if she misbehaves inside, she can get another three days. Girls are given adequate bathroom breaks, he said, and taken to chapel. Although he remembers one girl being kept in the room overnight, he said “no one’s been in there a month or weeks.”

But if Cookston wanted to hold girls that long in isolation, there was little to stop him.

During its 28-year history, FACCCA, the private, nonprofit agency that oversees Lighthouse, has had no limit on how long its facilities could hold children in seclusion.

After the Times visited the home, FACCCA inspectors went to the campus and told Cookston he had to cap seclusion time to one day. The association plans to adjust its standards, executive director Buddy Morrow said.

FACCCA officials also told Lighthouse it could not use children to watch or restrain others.

“That was not acceptable,” Morrow said.

Stories from the past

Lighthouse’s story goes back long before Cookston and stretches far beyond Jay. It even meanders through Mexico. But it begins with the name on a Panhandle



NO RADIO, NO TV, NO INTERNET: These decorations in the cafeteria have a religious and patriotic theme. A proper response at Lighthouse is “yes, ma’am,” not “yeah.”

property deed: Pastor Michael Palmer.

In 1985, at a gated compound in Ramona, Calif., the Baptist preacher founded Victory Christian Academy, a home to reform troubled girls. It was never licensed.

In 1988, a student working on a campus construction project was killed by falling lumber. After that, California officials saw the “Get Right Room,” where girls told them they were confined for up to 12 days, made to listen to hours of taped sermons.

In 1992, a judge ordered that Palmer apply for a state license or shut down.

Instead, Palmer moved to Florida, where a religious exemption meant he could run Victory without government hassle.

That very year, Victory was up and running in Jay.

Although Florida child abuse investigators reviewed allegations several times, they never found evidence of abuse, and Palmer’s girls’ home operated without public incident for years.

Then in 2004, a former resident showed up outside the home and caused a stir in this sleepy town. She carried a sign calling Palmer a rapist.

In November of that year, Rebecca Ramirez, 36, told Santa Rosa sheriff’s deputies the pastor raped her in 1992 while she was 16 at the home in Florida. The Times does not typically name alleged victims of sexual abuse, but Ramirez gave permission to identify her, believing it will give validity to her story.

She told the Times the abuse began with private, lights-off sermons in his office. She said he told her God wanted him to make her his wife, and when she reminded him he already had a wife, he said that marriage didn’t count because it happened before he was a Christian.

“He was kissing on me,” she said. “And then he told me to lay down on the floor.

“And so I did....

“I didn’t make a noise. I didn’t say anything....

“You don’t talk back to him.”

Palmer has denied it all. A statute of limitations prevented the case from moving forward.

Palmer left Lighthouse not long after Ramirez’s report. He did not respond to a letter the Times mailed to a home he owns in Fort Dodge, Iowa. He no longer appears to be running the girl’s home in Florida.

He left that to Pastor Cookston, whose daughter had lived at Palmer’s home.

Cookston said he started working at the home in 1996 and soon after moved to Mexico, where Palmer had started Genesis by the Sea, a girls’ home near Rosarito Beach.

Cookston was head pastor when the home was shut down by Mexican authorities in 2004.

At the time, officials said the home was not properly licensed. They were concerned by the electric fence surrounding Genesis and told the Copley News Service that neighbors had reported hearing “cries in the night.”

The Times spoke with three former Genesis residents who said “flooring” was common under Cookston’s leadership and recalled a girl who slept bound to her bed.

That former resident, Melanie Villaruel, 26, told the Times that when she was caught after running away, she was made to walk barefoot for weeks, bound in



STUDY AND SERMONS: Girls do their schoolwork at Lighthouse of Northwest Florida, where most days start before sunrise. They'll spend at least a year at Lighthouse. Tuition at the boarding home for troubled girls costs \$1,500 a month, paid for privately by parents and donations.

plastic zip-ties.

Cookston denies any abuse occurred in Mexico and said authorities there shut him down for technical infractions, including not having a permit for a sign on a wall and not having business hours posted.

And Palmer?

"The only reason he holds onto a house here is so he feels he still has it or has claim to it," Cookston said. "I let the parents know that he's not here. He's not a part of this ministry. He's gone.

"But what do you do about stories from the past?"

'I'm so sorry'

In 2007, St. Petersburg mother Michelle Brooks needed help with her daughter's uncontrollable violence. She was disillusioned by state-licensed group homes, where she felt Lindsay didn't get adequate supervision and staff was just there for a paycheck.

She was drawn to Lighthouse because it shared her Christian ideals. She spoke to Cookston and his wife and she saw misty eyes and heard trembling voices when they spoke of changing girls' lives.

She still feels they care.

But had she known what would happen to her daughter, she said she would never have agreed to send Lindsay to Lighthouse.

Lindsay had been there for almost two years when Brooks called the pastor from the hospital the second time her daughter was taken in under the Baker Act, a Florida law that allows for the temporary detention of a person having a mental health emergency.

She had some serious questions.

Lindsay had told hospital workers she had been hog-tied.

Brooks knew Lindsay might be restrained.

But she didn't expect this.

Lindsay had been kicking people, she remembers the pastor told her. "Well, I know she can do that," Brooks said.

"But then he's telling me that she wouldn't stop screaming for eight to 10 hours solid. Solid.

"How they weren't feeding her because she would throw the plate, so they stopped bringing her food.

"Her feet and her hands were bound because she was trying to hurt other people.

"And I said, why didn't you have her Baker Acted before you bound her hands and her feet?"

"He says, 'Because we're trying to handle her.'"

She remembers he acknowledged, in that conversation, that his group home was not equipped to deal with Lindsay.

"I was done," the mother said. "I didn't know where we were going from here. I didn't know what all of this meant. But all I knew was that wasn't okay."

Lindsay is doing better now, in her social abilities and behavior.

Her mother says she connected with some good staff members at Lighthouse and, like some others who spoke with the Times, left with a deeper sense of faith. She was also weaned off of medications that did her more harm than good.

But something needs to change, Michelle Brooks said.

"There absolutely needs to be regulation somewhere," she said. "There needs to be outside eyes. These children have emotional difficulties. So there should absolutely be someone there, in the mental health field that's licensed by the state, monitored by the state and who is also reporting back to state agencies what's taking place."

Michelle Brooks listened to Lindsay describe it all to a reporter this past summer, and the mother had to pause at one point, saying she couldn't breathe.

At the end of the interview, she hugged her daughter and whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report.



ONLINE Stories from survivors, details about unlicensed religious homes investigated for alleged abuse. Go to tampabay.com/faccca