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In God's name | Second of three parts

NO ONE IN FLORIDA MONITORS boarding schools, not even an unlicensed military-style program with a history of complaints and a penchant for “bizarre” punishment. Just ask the “colonel.”



THE PIT: Boys work out in a sand pit at Southeastern Military Academy, which abuts Florida's Turnpike in Port St. Lucie. The Christian minister who runs the program says he takes a “mind, body and soul” approach.

Bruised, but still standing

STORIES BY ALEXANDRA ZAYAS • PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN FLYNN • TIMES

Anyone can run a program that houses troubled children in Florida.

Even Alan Weierman.

In the past decade, state officials have investigated an unlicensed military program run by the self-titled “colonel” 24 times and found evidence that kids were punched, kicked, slammed into hard objects and choked to unconsciousness.

They know about a boy who left Weierman's home in 2004 on the verge of kidney failure.

And another boy who was shackled for 12 days in 2008 and called a “black monkey.”

They say Weierman, a Christian minister, has repeatedly crossed the line of abuse in his three decades running religious group homes in this state. Regulators have tried to shut him down.

The state license to operate his children's home lasted only two years.

Eight years ago, he lost a religious exemption that had allowed him to keep his reform home open without government oversight.

So now he operates without any state-recognized accreditation at all.

He has even had to answer allegations of sexual abuse and of failing to report abuse alleged by a girl at his facility.

The facility staff engage in discipline that is harmful, DCF officials wrote in a report four years ago.

The risk to children is high.

Yet his home is still open and caring for a dozen boys.

Still collecting \$28,600 per child from parents.

Still punishing kids in ways that trouble the state.

Easy to abuse

The story of Southeastern Military Academy exposes an ugly truth about Florida - you can get a license to open a group home, torment children for years and face few repercussions, so long as you are not convicted of a crime.

The Department of Children and Families can storm into licensed homes, order changes and remove children. But the department's ultimate weapon - revoking a home's license - is virtually meaningless.

Lose your state license and you can apply for a religious exemption. Lose that and you can register as a “boarding school.”

Each time, the process starts over. New regulators with different rules come to visit.

Each step down the regulatory ladder relaxes the standards required of a children's home.

Or you can start out as a “boarding school” and skip the hassles of licensing and government oversight

altogether.

State-licensed facilities are inspected by DCF; religious exempt homes are reviewed by a private, non-profit agency with headquarters in Lake City.

No one in Florida monitors boarding schools, which are allowed three years to apply for accreditation by one of five organizations listed in statute. Those organizations focus largely on academics.

DCF investigators respond to abuse allegations at all children's homes. But for years they did not routinely verify whether those facilities had their required credentials. DCF officials said that's because state abuse investigators didn't understand the "intricacies of the law."

"That is not the duty of the DCF investigator," DCF spokeswoman Erin Gillespie said in April. "If anyone had any concerns that these homes were running illegally, they would have to report that to DCF and our licensing staff or legal team would investigate."

In response to the Times' investigation, DCF is now making sure abuse investigators check a facility's credentials.

But for years while DCF waited for the general public to make a complaint, homes fell through the cracks.

Southeastern Military Academy, which the state once took to court because it had no accreditation, has been operating without state-recognized oversight for years.

When asked about the academy earlier this year, a DCF spokesperson questioned whether the home remained open, hearing that the site "looked abandoned," with a "For Sale" sign outside.

The 'colonel'

Southeastern Military Academy abuts Florida's Turnpike on an unfenced property in Port St. Lucie where anyone can see boys sweat in a sand pit, counting exercises for a man in fatigues.

That man, 50-year-old Alan Weierman, is big and tall and wears his graying hair high and tight; "snow on top," he calls the style.

Smiling, drinking coffee in his combat boots, he has been up for five hours when he greets visitors at 9 a.m. on a recent Wednesday. He hands them a business card emblazoned with a U.S. Army logo and the title "colonel."

Weierman is not affiliated with any branch of the military. Nor has he ever been close to the rank of colonel. He says he tried to join the Army more than three decades ago but was dismissed after six weeks because he was allergic to bees.

"I'm not sorry where I'm at today," he said. "It all comes around to where you still get to serve. Training young men is like being in the military. It's like training soldiers all over again - kids with no respect for parents, no respect for police, or themselves."

Weierman says he instills that respect in the dozen boys in his care.

He takes in "recruits" as young as 11, strips them of individuality, dictates rules and nitpicks for infractions. When they break and lose control, he says, he builds them back up.

His program is not about "breaking down" kids or creating "robots," he says. It's about shaping behavior that will last. He says the "mind, body and soul" approach includes daily spiritual devotions, Sunday worship and accommodations for boys of other religions.

"It doesn't matter to me why he's here. It doesn't



DISCIPLINE AND ORDER: Alan Weierman gives reporters a tour of the boys' bunks at Southeastern Military Academy in Port St. Lucie on Sept. 19. Weierman refers to himself as "colonel" but is not a member of the military.

matter to me even what he thinks about being here," Weierman said. "He understands there is compliance. He must understand there are rules."

Weierman's program is built around discipline that would never be allowed at a state licensed home.

Parents sign a contract allowing corporal punishment and giving up the right to sue, even if their child dies.

Weierman says he hasn't had to shackle a boy in years, but reserves the right to do it when a boy presents a threat or tries to run away.

While the home has been accused by state child protection workers of abusive treatment, nothing has been proved to rise to criminal child abuse.

Still, even Weierman concedes there have been problems.

He stopped showing the war film *Full Metal Jacket* after he caught boys having "blanket parties," mimicking a scene in the movie where a recruit is gang-beaten with bars of soap, wrapped in towels.

Over the years, child abuse investigators have found dozens of children with minor injuries and classified the cases as maltreatment stemming from out-of-control disciplinary efforts.

Moving to Florida

Weierman scoffs at the idea that the harsh discipline doled out at his group home amounts to child abuse. He says he knows real abuse.

"My dad shot me when I was 13 years old, trying to kill me," he said. "I was ripped out of bed many nights and beaten bloody, simply because I failed to close a gate or shut a door."

He grew up hard in Ohio in the 1970s. By 17, he said, he had racked up criminal charges, including armed robbery. A judge told him to choose between the military or jail.

Around that time, he met William Brink, a preacher who had an Ohio group home and ministered to delinquent youths. Brink invited Weierman to live at the religious home.

He showed up with long hair and a leather vest.

"I was just 12 ways of bad."

But Weierman quickly gained Brink's trust and at 19, he married the preacher's daughter. They worked together at the children's home in the early 1980s, when Ohio regulators required the home to stop using corporal punishment.

In 1984, Florida legislators passed a law that would allow religious homes to use corporal punishment if they could justify it with Scripture.

Weierman's father-in-law was among the first to apply. In 1985, he opened Victory Children's Home, a home for abused and abandoned children in Fort Pierce.

His son-in-law would soon work there.

But not before leaving behind an allegation in Ohio.

In 1986, a 16-year-old girl told police she had had sex with Weierman more than 30 times. The girl passed a lie-detector test and had kept a calendar of the sexual encounters, the local police chief told the Akron Beacon Journal at the time.

Weierman denied the allegations. And prosecutors declined to press charges, saying there wasn't enough evidence.

Still, Brink and his home took criticism. After learning of the girl's allegations months before the police, group home officials conducted their own investigation. They deemed the allegations false and never reported them to police.

Three years later, Weierman would find himself in a similar position. He investigated sex abuse claims against his new home's director without informing police.

Police later arrested Weierman and accused him of tampering with a witness and failure to report child abuse. Although the charges were dropped, Weierman now says he should have called police as soon as he heard the girl's allegation.

A few years later, his father-in-law was convicted in Ohio of sexual abuse involving a 14-year-old resident he took in as his daughter and a 16-year-old he made his wife.

Brink went to prison.

Weierman remained in charge of the Florida home, now split from the Ohio pastor.

A state license

Through the 1990s, Weierman would continue to have problems. State abuse investigators were called to his campus at least four times, finding evidence once that Victory Children's Home was using excessive corporal punishment.

At the end of the decade, despite years of complaints, DCF granted Weierman a state license to run a foster home in Florida. The license meant more stringent rules and more state inspections, but it allowed Weierman's home to accept children seized from parents by child protection workers.

Both sides soon had regrets.

In 2000 alone, DCF records show six child abuse allegations: a boy thrown by a staff member, one dragged and beaten by a peer then refused medical treatment, a boy abandoned in the parking lot of another youth shelter, and kids being hit with a belt and slammed against walls and the ground.

Reports show DCF investigators found credible evidence in four of the cases, including those involving asphyxiation and beatings.

Weierman denies all abuse allegations.

"If I said to you, 'If you don't straighten up, I'm going to kick the snot out of you,' is that threatened harm? I don't know," he said. "Child abuse requires intent to commit harm. You have to intend to commit the harm."

Weierman said he regrets getting a state license, saying the state's requirement that his children have access to an abuse hotline led to a spate of false reports.

"If you're a licensed facility, you have to make a



CHOKING IT DOWN: A 14-year-old eats a bowl of "stuff" during lunch at Southeastern Military Academy. Eating "stuff" is a form of punishment. On this day it was a bowl of soggy vegetables swimming in vinegar and spices. Boys must eat every bite and they must be quick about it.

phone available to any child," Weierman said. "At times, I had eight investigators here at a time...

"Children can lie."

By the end of 2000, DCF had had enough.

On the day the agency was scheduled to present evidence to a judge to revoke Weierman's license, he surrendered it.

But that wasn't the end.

A second chance

When a group home that calls itself Christian can't or won't get a license, when it is chased out of another state for refusing oversight, or, like Weierman's, when it fails to meet government standards, Florida provides a fallback:

FACCCA accreditation.

Florida is among a handful of states that legally recognize a religious exemption when it comes to licensing children's homes.

By law, exempted facilities must register with the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a nonprofit group that accredits homes. The association has long allowed homes to strike children with paddles, so long as they justify it with the Bible and pray with the child afterward.

Weierman surrendered his home's state license on Feb. 12, 2001. The following month, DCF got a letter saying FACCCA had accredited his home.

Under FACCCA, Weierman was able to shut down direct access to the state's child abuse hotline, which was created to dispatch authorities any time allegations are reported.

Longtime child advocate Jack Levine, who opposed the religious exemption when it was voted into law in 1984, says such safeguards exist for a reason. To complain that kids lie is just a way of avoiding scrutiny, he said.

"It's so easy to find an excuse for doing the wrong thing," he said. "You can blame the child. You can blame the system. You can sit around and make excuses for any kind of malfeasance, but that doesn't make it right."

Weierman's home was accredited by FACCCA for three years. The complaints kept coming.

2002: The facility has been locking kids up in chains to keep them from running.

2002: Many of the children have current bruises or have had bruises in the past.

2003: Alan Weierman grabbed a child by the neck and slammed him against the wall with force.

2004: A staff member punched (a child) in the mouth and kned him in the chest... As a result, his mouth was bleeding.

Investigating these cases, DCF found credible evidence of beatings, inappropriate or excessive restraints, bruises or welts and physical injury.

Michele Muccigrosso sued Weierman's corporation, saying her 12-year-old son, Dillon, was made to hike on broken feet.

"Our insurance company settled," Weierman said. "That's the learning curve. ... We marched them a lot, younger guys, 10, 11, 12 years old. Plates are still growing in their feet. We cut back the marching."

Muccigrosso said the home disregarded a doctor's order that her son not hike.

"He was in a wheelchair for five months."

FACCCA cut ties with Weierman in June 2004. Its executive director later told police it was because the religious home had become a boot camp.

FACCCA officials have declined to provide the Times records of inspections, complaints or investigations at any of the homes it has accredited. They said they do not accredit boot camps because they are "not appropriate."

The last rung

After failing under two separate forms of oversight in less than four years, Weierman was not shut down.

Instead, he took advantage of a loophole in state law that allows children's homes to skirt oversight by calling themselves "boarding schools."

Department of Education officials keep a list of boarding schools, but do not police them. They do not inspect the campuses or establish discipline standards for the schools.

A state law passed in 2006 says boarding schools must be accredited by one of five scholastic organizations.

But those groups focus on academics. And no one has been checking to make sure the schools meet the requirement.

Weierman's program has not been accredited under the boarding school rules since it registered as one, under the name Victory Forge, in 2004.

With the new name, came new complaints.



FOLLOWING ORDERS: A "recruit" rushes to line up before the boys head outside to exercise. Push-ups can be used as punishment here.



STRUCTURED LIVING: Boys march to their seats for lunch at Southeastern Military Academy. Throughout the day, recruits get lists of orders they must follow or face punishment.

In July 2004, Weierman says, a boy left on the verge of kidney failure after being forced to endure what the colonel called an "extreme" amount of exercise.

Weierman said the boy's kidneys were not functioning correctly and staff at the home made it worse by forcing him to drink a quart of water an hour.

"The more we did that, the more damage was caused by doing that," Weierman said. "There was no way we could know."

Weierman said a detective gave him "accolades" for catching the damage on time.

DCF made a "verified" finding of medical neglect.

Then, on April 6, 2008, Port St. Lucie police officers came upon the aftermath of a capture.

A runaway sat shirtless on a bench outside a middle school, cuffed at the hands, shackled at the ankles, surrounded by Weierman's staff and the boys who had taken him down. He bore a 5-inch red mark on his neck.

"Please take me to jail," 16-year-old Lochane Smith told the officers. "I don't want to go back."

When an officer questioned the home's authority to shackle the student, Weierman cursed and yelled, police reports show. "If you had a black kid like that," he told police, "you would put him in handcuffs also."

The police took Smith to the station, where they got his story.

He said he had been shackled for 12 days, chained at the wrists even as he slept on his top bunk and released only to shower.

Employees had punched him, choked him, thrown him against the walls.

He ran when he got a chance, vaulting over the fence, darting across the highway.

The home sent a search party, including boys.

He told police a recruit named Tango ran toward him yelling "I'm going to get you, black boy," then tackling him and choking him, until an employee told Tango, "You better stop, the police are coming."

DCF interviewed the 15 other boys at the facility and determined all had been in some way mistreated - bruised, bloodied, choked, shackled, subjected to "cruel and unusual punishment."

One had been called an "Iraqi" and a "rag head."

Smith had been called a "black monkey."

Soon after the incident, DCF called parents to take their boys home.

Police spoke to those same boys, who reported they saw Smith being pushed, dragged and "tossed around." But the police determined none of his injuries rose to child abuse.

St. Lucie County Assistant State Attorney Jeff Hen-

driks wrote a letter saying no charges would be filed, in part, because parents had consented to corporal punishment.

In an interview from the jail where he landed years later on robbery charges, Smith, now 21, said the abuse was worse than that police report suggests.

He said staff slammed his head into the walls on the first day because he cried and pushed his face in the sand.

Smith said he was made to stand all day and allowed to urinate on himself.

“Some boot camps help people,” he said, “but Victory Forge made me worse.

“Look how I ended up.

“I pray nothing like what happened to me happens to someone else.”

‘Good faith effort’

In 2009, DCF tried to force Weierman to submit to oversight or shut down for good.

By then, he was calling his home Southeastern Military Academy and had registered it as a boarding school.

DCF sued, saying the registration and name changes were “evidence of his intent to circumvent and subvert” statute. The lawsuit summarized a history that included 35 prior child abuse allegations.

The staff at this facility, DCF wrote, continues to cross the line between acceptable discipline and abuse.

DCF attorneys argued that Weierman had no license or accreditation. Under state law, he should be considered a rogue foster home and be barred from accepting children.

But in a March 2011 order, St. Lucie Circuit Judge Dan L. Vaughn found that Weierman was making a “good faith effort” to get accredited and denied DCF’s request for an injunction.

A year later, Weierman is still trying to get accredited. He has applied with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which accredits public and private schools. The process takes a couple of years. Weierman says his home is up for review in March.

“I’m hoping and I’m praying they don’t look at the politics of it,” he said.

Still in business

For now, Southeastern Military Academy continues its daily routine.

Weierman still doesn’t have a problem threatening to beat a kid into a “bloody mud puddle.”

He needs to let them know he’s in charge.

When they threaten to fight him, he threatens them back - “I’m going to hurt you,” “I’m going to send you to the hospital,” “With my dying breath, I’m going to



RUNAWAY SHACKLED: In 2008, when the home was called Victory Forge, Lochane Smith escaped. He told police he’d been shackled for 12 days. He recently gave an interview from jail: “Look how I ended up.”

take you with me.”

“It’s all bull,” he said. “It’s all just a facade.”

But that facade is how Weierman molds his rebellious young boys.

At the academy, every action is scrutinized. A wrinkle in a bedsheet, a boot misplaced by 2 inches - all are worthy of punishment, because, to Weierman, all indicate something inside the boy is still defiant. Throughout the day, recruits get lists of orders they must follow. But instructors switch up orders to cause confusion and create a reason to dole out punishment.

Any excuse is good enough. If a student asks permission to do something that’s already on his to-do list, he is punished.

Twenty-five push-ups here, 150 side-straddle hops there. Boys spend many hours in the “pit.”

They can also get swats and lose family visits. Michaela Mattox turned to Weierman to deal with the 14-year-old son she couldn’t control. He was defiant, running away, smoking marijuana.

She left him at the academy five months ago without touring the home and now has regrets. She doesn’t even know the names of the “captains” on the phone.

She has read about other boys’ allegations online. And when she speaks to her son on the phone, with staff listening, he cries so hard, she can barely understand what he says.

Your son may complain to you about unbearable pain, crying that it’s too hard, says parent literature. DON’T BE FOOLED!

Among the most feared punishments is being sentenced to bowls of “stuff.”

Boys on “stuff” must down soggy bowls of vegeta-

bles, swimming in vinegar and designed not to go down easy.

They get “stuff” every meal, every day until they complete their sentence. Some go more than a week with nothing else to eat. If they don’t finish a bowl, it gets served up at the next meal.

Forcing kids to eat “stuff” may sound like juvenile hazing, but state child safety regulators have labeled it “bizarre punishment.”

Weierman doesn’t buy it. “It’s mind over matter,” Weier-

Critical moments in Alan Weierman’s career

- 1984** Florida creates religious exemption for group homes.

1985 “Colonel” Alan Weierman’s father-in-law opens Victory Children’s Home, a religious children’s home in Florida.

1986 A 16-year-old girl says she had a sexual relationship with Weierman when he was working at a children’s home in Ohio. No charges filed.

1989 Weierman is aware but does not report a girl’s sex abuse allegations against another staff member at his Florida group home. Charges of tampering with a witness and failure to report abuse are later dropped.

1992 Weierman and his wife change the name of the home to Treasure Coast Victory Children’s Home when his father-in-law is accused of sexual abuse. They incorporate the home in Florida.
- FEB. 2001** After operating under DCF oversight for about two years, and dealing with an increase in abuse allegations and findings, the home surrenders its state license. A month later, it is operating with religious accreditation under FACCCA.

JUNE 2004 The home loses its religious accreditation. Weierman changes the name of the home and registers as a “boarding school.”

APRIL 8, 2008 A boy claims he was shackled at the home for 12 days straight and berated with racial slurs.

2009 State officials seek a judge’s order to shut down the home, arguing it is not legally accredited. A judge later refuses.

man recently told a few boys, who had 15 minutes to shovel the peas and corn into their mouths.

“It’s just vegetables.”

They lifted their bowls to drink the acidic dregs.

One gagged.

Another vomited.

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report.

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