

Beaten, then silenced

At the oldest U.S. reform school for boys, leaders of the prestigious Glen Mills Schools in Pennsylvania have hidden a long history of violence.

[by Lisa Gartner](#), Updated: February 20, 2019

The drive from Philadelphia winds southwest on the interstate, the city blocks giving way to wooded hills, the clock tower at the Glen Mills Schools finally coming into view. Every week, the mother drove the hour to visit her son at the school for delinquent boys.

Founded in 1826, Glen Mills is the oldest existing school of its kind in the country, with a reputation akin to the Harvard of reform schools. Boys are sent to the Delaware County campus from California, Texas, New York, and Ohio, and its top-tier athletic program yields NFL recruits. With its redbrick buildings and neatly trimmed quad, Glen Mills looks more like an elite prep school than a program for court-ordered boys.



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer

Founded in 1826 as the Philadelphia House of Refuge, Glen Mills is the oldest school for delinquent boys in the country, set on nearly 800 acres of rolling hills in Delaware County.

But visiting her son one day in 2017, the boy's mother immediately knew something was wrong. His eyes were red and unfocused. He seemed dazed and had an ugly knot on the back of his head. The teenager insisted everything was fine.

“Don’t lie to me,” she said. He reluctantly told her: A Glen Mills counselor had picked him up and thrown him on his head, knocking him unconscious for several minutes. Another student had had to shake the teenager awake. The counselor was punishing him, the 16-year-old told his mother, for mouthing off.

>>**UPDATE:** [More than 80 boys to leave Glen Mills after Inquirer investigation of abuse](#)

She began to scream at every staffer she could find. Their response, she says, was that they could report the abuse to the state Department of Human Services — but if they did, her son would likely go to a less desirable placement than Glen Mills, one where he could no longer play sports. “They basically gave me an ultimatum,” she says. “It was ‘Do you want to tell, or do you want to throw it under the rug?’ ”

Serious violence is both an everyday occurrence and an open secret at Glen Mills, and has been for decades, an Inquirer investigation has found. Internal documents, court records, incident reports, and more than 40 interviews with students, staff, and others show top leaders turn a blind eye to the beatings and insulate themselves from reports while failing to properly vet or train the school’s counselors.

When students and their families try to report these attacks, the Inquirer found, Glen Mills staff uses the school’s prestige as a weapon: They say Glen Mills is as good as it gets, and that if students complain, they’ll be shipped off to a state-run facility crowded with boys who are mentally ill or have committed sex offenses.

“I’ve seen people thrown through doors, like it was a movie.”

James Johnson, former Glen Mills student and counselor

To keep teens quiet, counselors and supervisors threaten the boys with longer sentences, claiming that if they went to another placement, their time would restart. Other Glen Mills staffers have hidden students until their bruises disappear.

“There are kids who can’t come home because they are getting abused,” said James Johnson, a former Glen Mills student who went on to become a counselor — then quit in 2015 over what was happening to boys. “I’ve seen people thrown through doors, like it was a movie.”



Julia Rendleman

James Johnson, a former Glen Mills student turned counselor, says he quit in 2015 after his colleagues beat a boy to the point that his eye was nearly out of the socket. Johnson said the counselors confined the boy to his room until his injuries healed.

Over the course of several weeks, Glen Mills executive director Randy Ireson repeatedly declined to be interviewed for this story through a spokesperson at Brian Communications. (The public-relations firm is owned by Brian Tierney, who is a board member of the Inquirer's parent company, Philadelphia Media Network.)

Nevertheless, the newspaper, as a courtesy, provided Ireson with a comprehensive memo disclosing the story's findings on Feb. 11. On Feb. 15, [Glen Mills announced](#) the formation of a special task force composed of students, parents, staff, and child protection experts to conduct "an in-depth review into reports of misconduct" and "identify areas of opportunity for change."

"We have a responsibility to provide the highest quality services to at-risk youth who we serve," said Ireson in the news release. "We have asked for and expect a frank and candid assessment."

In addition, Ireson and his staff recently provided Philadelphia's Department of Human Services with a "corrective action plan" promising sweeping changes to everything from hiring practices and staff training to school culture and student grievance procedures.



Alejandro A. Alvarez

Randy Ireson became the executive director of the Glen Mills Schools in 2013. The former college football player started as a counselor in 1979.

But local officials, after reading an earlier version of this story online Wednesday, said these promises weren't enough. Philadelphia will remove its 51 boys currently at Glen Mills, DHS spokesperson Heather Keafer told the Inquirer.

The process of moving the boys to other facilities will take a few weeks, as each child's case has to be reviewed individually by the court, "something that's done with much thought and consideration," Keafer said.

Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson said Wednesday that Glen Mills needs a complete overhaul of leadership; Councilmember Helen Gym called for an immediate independent investigation, "specifically around the evidence of potential abuse, coverup, witness intimidation, and what criminal and civil laws may have been broken."

Although a privately run nonprofit, Glen Mills receives taxpayer money, including a tuition of \$52,000 per year for each boy from Philadelphia. In fiscal 2017, Ireson [received \\$336,000](#) in total compensation from the school, which has annual revenues of around \$40 million.

State law allows counselors at residential facilities to use approved "restraint techniques" to calm a child who is an immediate danger to himself or others.

But the experiences of 21 current and former students and counselors, examined by the Inquirer, show that counselors throw punches and break boys' bones to punish them for breaking school rules. One boy said he was beaten and choked for running away. Another student suffered a broken jaw over a joke about a counselor's sister.

The U.S. Department of Justice has "[an ongoing law enforcement proceeding](#)" at Glen Mills Schools, according to an October letter from the department's Civil Rights Division.

Related stories

-
- [Glen Mills hit with federal lawsuit by former students alleging abuse](#)
 - [State orders 'emergency removal' of remaining boys at Glen Mills Schools after abuse revelations](#)
 - [Pennsylvania inspector general launches investigation on oversight of Glen Mills](#)

In the school visitation room that day, the boy's mother was afraid that what the counselors told her was true — if she reported the beating, as the school had failed to do, her son might end up somewhere worse. She said nothing. (The Inquirer agreed not to name the mother and son because he is still at Glen Mills.)

She went to see him a few months later. The boy pulled off his sweatshirt. His arms were black with bruises. The skin on his back was missing in patches.

More violence, he explained, from his counselors at Glen Mills.

A hidden history

Glen Mills Schools has been promising to stop beating boys for at least two decades.

The school as it exists today starts with C.D. Ferrainola, described in news reports as “hot-tempered” and “cigar-chomping.” Ferrainola became the director of Glen Mills in 1975 and stayed put through 2007. Originally named the Philadelphia House of Refuge, the modest school of fewer than 100 boys grew in size and reputation under his watch.

Ferrainola’s hallmark: a peer-pressure model, in which boys informed on one another. Any failure to do so would make the boy just as guilty as the one doing wrong. To this day, reporting on their fellow classmates earns students “status,” allowing them to move through campus without adult supervision and enjoy privileges like home passes and the chance to compete on sports teams.



St. Petersburg Times

C.D. Ferrainola, executive director from 1975 through 2007, built Glen Mills into an athletics powerhouse with booming enrollment. Records show he tried to keep state police from interviewing students about abuse complaints at the school.

Neat lines of well-behaved boys charmed the delegations from Florida, Colorado, and Rhode Island that toured Glen Mills in the 1990s. “I can’t wait to get back to Miami so that I can try to convince Dade County to adopt this program so that we might save a whole generation of children,” said one school board member.

Glen Mills’ student body swelled to more than 1,000 as boys from all over the country, and even western and central Europe, began to enroll. They were diminutive next to the towering power-lifters

and ex-quarterbacks with whom Ferrainola staffed Glen Mills. He said he didn't care much about who majored in what in college; he liked to belittle social workers.

About 85 percent of the counselors he hired were former athletes. Lessons in hard work and teamwork, Ferrainola said, were more useful than counseling or family outreach.

Randy Ireson, the current executive director of Glen Mills, was an early Ferrainola hire. He started as a counselor in 1979, the same year he graduated from West Chester University, where he was a star defensive tackle on its football team.

Instead of social services, Glen Mills invested in campus athletics. Ferrainola built state-of-the-art facilities and stadiums; in 1999, he broke ground on an 18-hole public golf course next to Glen Mills, saying it would provide students with workforce-training opportunities, while profits went to college scholarships.



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer

A green at the Golf Course at Glen Mills.

“You know what you have here?” Ferrainola once boasted, waving his cigar. “You have a great prep school for the kids of rich parents.”

Officials from Florida to Germany began making plans to build their own campuses based on the Glen Mills model, and locally, applause for the school grew deafening.

But the Inquirer found a hidden history of abuse.

In 1996, as Florida officials studied the campus, a teenager from Miami let slip that a 6-foot-4 Glen Mills counselor had grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him on a pool table. His offense? Walking into the room without acknowledging the staffer. The next year, Chicago pulled its boys out of Glen Mills after two said they had been beaten by counselors.

Click on the map for more information.

Ferrainola dismissed these complaints as lies from disgruntled former students. But a tense face-off from 2000 shows how Glen Mills tried to hide abuse at all costs.

State police officers, along with agents of the state department that oversaw Glen Mills, came to interview a child over suspected abuse on Feb. 11, 2000. State records say the boy had a chipped tooth and chest bruising at the hands of two staffers. The boy had asked two other Glen Mills employees to report the violence in his unit's log book, and for medical and dental care. No report was made. No medical attention was given.

Glen Mills staffers [repeatedly tried to block access to the boy](#), even when warned they were obstructing a police investigation, state records say. After police put the boy into a cruiser, Ferrainola and several other Glen Mills staffers leaned into it to yell at the police and the child. One officer was so frightened for the safety of the boy that he took him to the state police barracks, believing he'd be better off there than at Glen Mills.

When state police returned the next month to interview five more boys, Ferrainola and the school's lawyer, Guy Vilim, were present as Glen Mills staff physically placed themselves between a child and an officer to prevent an interview.

But the state persisted in its case, and eight boys ultimately told investigators they were kicked, punched, "chopped in the throat," slapped, pushed, or slammed into walls by 18 staffers. They said Glen Mills counselors supervised their phone calls to keep them from telling their parents, or threatened them with worse placements and longer sentences.

The state agency that licenses and oversees these schools demanded reforms. Glen Mills submitted a corrective action plan, promising to retrain its counselors on proper restraint techniques, to report all complaints of abuse to the state within 24 hours, and to allow children unsupervised phone calls. School leaders pledged to notify all counselors in writing that there could be no retaliation against a boy who reported abuse.

The state was satisfied and, by the end of 2000, Glen Mills was back in good standing. Ferrainola died in 2011. For a long time, it appeared there was nothing wrong at the beautiful school set on rolling hills.

'An isolated incident'

In August, the Inquirer [reported](#) that a Glen Mills counselor had lifted a boy in the air, slammed him down on his back, then choked the asthmatic teen for several minutes while he cried, "I can't breathe."

The school's leaders called [the attack on A.W.](#), a 17-year-old from Philadelphia, an anomaly.

"We immediately self-reported an isolated incident involving staff that did not uphold our stringent ethical standards and protocols," said Ireson, the executive director, in an emailed statement at the time.

After A.W.'s attack, Philadelphia DHS Commissioner Cynthia Figueroa put a temporary hold on sending additional boys to the school, but commended its leadership's "100 percent ownership and accountability" of the incident. Boys have been sent to Glen Mills from Montgomery, Chester, and a dozen other Pennsylvania counties, but about 40 percent of the 383 students at the school at the time were from Philadelphia.



HEATHER KHALIFA / Staff Photographer

A teenager assaulted by counselors at Glen Mills last summer is photographed outside his Philadelphia home. A.W., who asked to be identified by his initials, said he couldn't breathe during the attack.

Since August, the school's enrollment has fallen to 238. Philadelphia DHS recently accepted a new corrective action plan from Glen Mills and, as of two weeks ago, had planned to resume sending boys there. Figueroa had said she was not aware of previous promises of reform that Glen Mills had made — then broken — to the state.

Less than three weeks after A.W.'s July beating, a counselor punched 19-year-old Mecca Simms in the face, breaking his nose.

Simms said in an interview that the counselor — a former Glen Mills student quarterback — was angry because the Philadelphia teen didn't get off the phone with his girlfriend quickly enough. The counselor hit Simms several times before he swung back, Simms said. Glen Mills staff waited two days to take him to the hospital, Simms said, where he had surgery on Aug. 8. Both counselor and student received police citations.

“It was the first time it happened to me,” Simms said, “but kids always get hit like that there.”

In 2017, a homesick boy from Los Angeles — who asked to be identified by his initials, J.R. — ran away from Glen Mills. (Because they are juveniles and abuse victims, the Inquirer agreed to identify sources like J.R. and A.W. by their initials.)

Staffers quickly found the 17-year-old in the woods, then took him to a school stairwell. Four counselors took turns sitting on J.R.'s chest, choking and punching him, while others looked on. His back ached, his throat hurt, and he could barely leave bed for weeks, he said in an interview.

Two different boys injured their heads so severely during “restraints” that school year that their scalps had to be stapled shut, according to court records. Another student had to receive stitches in his back after a counselor pushed him through a plateglass window in October 2017.

In June of that year, a Philadelphia student made a sexual joke about a counselor’s sister. Several staffers jumped the teenager, who weighed about 140 pounds. One of them stepped on his face, breaking his jaw.

It was wired shut when he appeared before a judge weeks later, according to a transcript of the June 23 hearing.

“Do you feel safe going back?” the judge asked the boy.

“No,” he said.

In the last five years, at least 13 Glen Mills staffers have been fired and dozens more have been retrained or reprimanded over assaults on 15 students at the school, according to records from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services.

But the state’s records severely underestimate the violence at Glen Mills, which students and counselors described as almost daily. For one, the state’s records only include reports that are made. Thirteen current and former students told the Inquirer they did not speak to state investigators about their attacks because they were threatened to keep quiet or physically prevented from reporting them.

J.R. did not tell his parents or lawyer what happened to him in the stairwell after he ran away. “They’ll give you a minute phone call and stand right next to you to make sure you don’t tell your mom anything,” he said.

Other boys said they were kept hidden from the rest of the school, receiving their meals in their rooms. Another had his home passes revoked so that his family could not see him.

In secret, the violence could be extreme. The Inquirer discovered at least four incidents of students crying they were unable to breathe during assaults by staff. And even the most vulnerable students weren’t safe from the beatings.

Nathan Thomas was born with a heart condition called aortic stenosis. He had open-heart surgery when he was 3 years old.



Jose Luis Villegas

Nathan Thomas was sent to Glen Mills after he got caught up in gang activity in Santa Cruz, Calif. Counselors left him alone because of his heart condition — until one caught him talking about the school’s violent culture with a fellow student, then choked him and slammed his head into a dorm refrigerator.

When the 16-year-old from Santa Cruz, Calif., arrived at Glen Mills in 2011, he said he warned the staff he couldn’t take blows to the chest.

Nathan quickly learned that counselors preferred to bash boys’ heads into the door of the refrigerator at the back of Lincoln Hall, hearing the distinct thud and his classmates’ screams from the next room over.

One day during his 2011-2013 stay, Nathan was caught playing hangman on a classroom whiteboard after finishing his schoolwork — a serious offense at Glen Mills, he said in an interview. A counselor he knew only as “Chris” dragged the teen by the collar to the refrigerator, where he said, “If you didn’t have a f—ing heart condition, I would tear you up right now.” Chris warned the teen that he wouldn’t be so lucky next time.

Nathan promised there wouldn’t be a next time. But less than two weeks later, he was using the bathroom when a new student spoke to him from the next stall over. “Is it true what I hear about this place?” he asked Nathan. “They beat up kids?”

The two boys sat in the stalls talking about the black eyes and busted lips Nathan had seen in his first months at Glen Mills. Then he flushed the toilet and opened the door. Chris was there and had heard everything. Before Nathan knew what was happening, he was back at the refrigerator.

The counselor grabbed him by the neck and slammed his head into the door, already dented by the skulls of his classmates. All the while, he choked him, spit in his face and screamed, "You stupid motherf—," Nathan said.

Another counselor came in and asked what was happening. He struck Nathan across the face. The boy started to cry as the beating continued, his fragile heart pounding in his chest.

Untrained and unprepared

Any teacher will tell you that controlling a classroom is a highly developed skill — one that's even more critical at a place like Glen Mills, where students have already run afoul of the law. But many Glen Mills counselors don't have the backgrounds or training they need to manage the boys in their care.

Ireson and his deputies have continued to recruit college athletes to Glen Mills, whether or not they had backgrounds working with troubled youth.

[Patrick Raquet](#), a professional strongman, earned a degree in psychology before Glen Mills made him a counselor in 2008. Six months before his promotion to supervisor, Raquet took first place in his class at the 2017 U.S. Powerlifting Association's National Bench Press and Deadlift Championship.

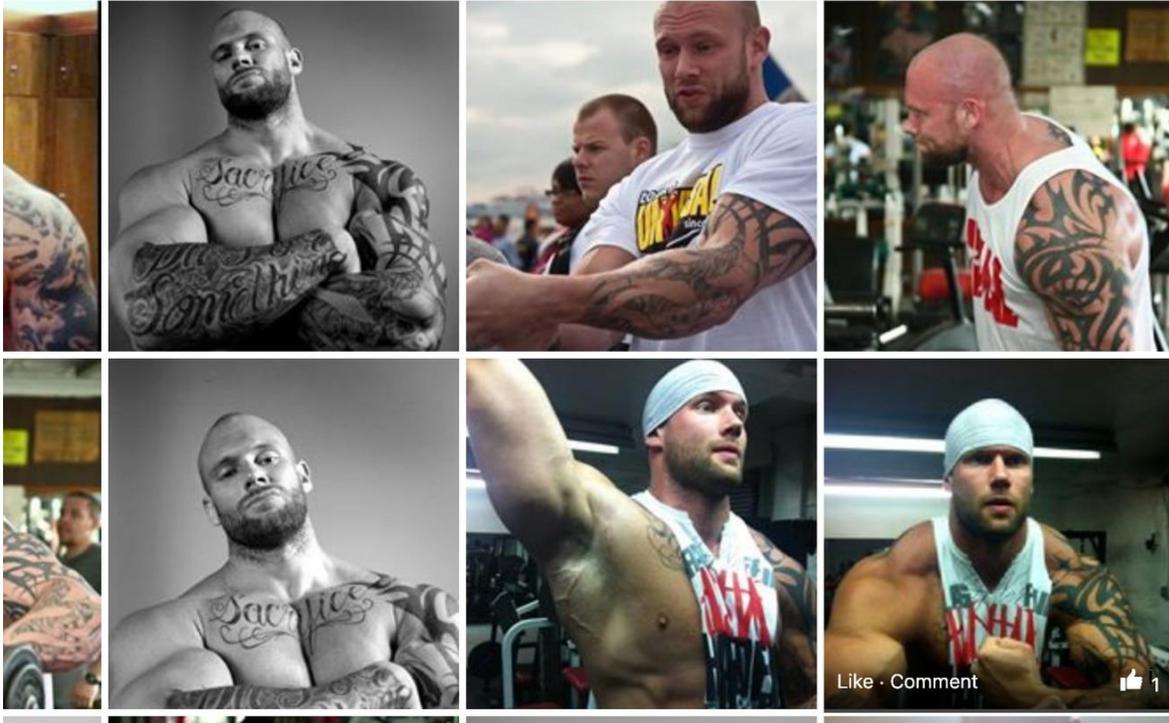
Share ...

Send Message

Patrick Raquet (USA)

18 Photos · Updated 5 years ago

Aka P Diesel. American strongman competitor, weight-lifter, propably amateur bodybuilder. Alpha stud!



Facebook

Patrick Raquet, who competes in powerlifting as "P Diesel," appears on a muscle-building Facebook page.

Last summer, [he was fired](#) for punching A.W. in the face.

Dennis McKimm II had worked as a part-time police officer in college before Glen Mills hired the 22-year-old. He had never considered working for a juvenile facility but needed work and saw the school's booth at a job fair, according to court records. In 2013, McKimm slammed a Philadelphia teen to the floor, shattering his elbow. He still works at Glen Mills, training his colleagues in "positive behavior and intervention supports."

Neither McKimm nor Raquet responded to requests for comment.

Cedric McNear was hired by Glen Mills six months after he walked off the job at another juvenile program. "I didn't know how to deal with troubled youth that well," McNear told the Inquirer, when asked why he abruptly left Abraxas Academy in Morgantown.

His time at Abraxas never came up in his Glen Mills interview, and McNear does not believe school leaders called Abraxas for a reference. In August 2018, McNear threw a cup at a child in the one hall with a surveillance camera, and was fired. "A lot of other staff members did worse and they were able to keep their jobs because it wasn't on video," he said.

Through a spokesperson for the school, Glen Mills leaders said they conduct phone and in-person interviews with potential candidates for counselor jobs, then take their fingerprints and run state and federal background checks.

In the corrective plan to Philadelphia DHS, the school's leaders have now promised to hire a "preemployment screening company" to better determine a candidate's "ability to work with difficult or high-risk youth and their ability to demonstrate patience."

Hiring recent graduates or former athletes is not a problem within itself. Proper training can help to ensure counselors don't lose their heads when put in charge of dozens of teenage boys, some with their own histories of violence. Boys come to Glen Mills for a variety of reasons, from racking up petty charges and violating probation, to wielding knives and participating in armed robberies.



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer

Less than an hour's drive from Center City, the Glen Mills Schools receives about 40 percent of its students from Philadelphia. After a local boy was attacked by counselors in July, Philadelphia suspended intake at Glen Mills. Enrollment at the school has declined to 238 students from the 383 it housed in September.

Under Pennsylvania law, staff at residential facilities like Glen Mills are required to receive training every year on appropriate restraint techniques. These sessions must emphasize de-escalation (to avoid getting physical whenever possible) and include demonstrations of specific techniques for limiting a child's movements.

Ireson's predecessor pledged to retrain the school's staff after a 2012 state child protective services investigation found that a counselor punished a child with an "inappropriate" restraint.

Ireson, who earned a doctorate degree in education while working at Glen Mills, became executive director on the first day of 2013. The next year, the state found that Glen Mills still was not providing adequate training.

According to sworn testimony from Glen Mills' in-house trainer, Carmelo Mustaccio, the school had not devised, let alone demonstrated, specific techniques for properly restraining students.

Instead, Mustaccio recertified Glen Mills' counselors each year by showing them a PowerPoint, demonstrating "gently" lowering others to the ground, and then giving out an open-book, multiple-choice quiz.

"Very rarely" did anyone fail [the 15-question quiz](#), Mustaccio said. The third question asks: "Which of the following does Glen Mills NOT allow when addressing student behavior?" The options are "verbal ridicule," "poking and slapping," "kicking and choking," or "all of the above."

"It's really just a big con. It's a big show."

Robert Taylor, former Glen Mills counselor

The counselors graded one another's papers. They could miss three questions and still pass. If someone failed the quiz, they stayed after class while the trainer went over the right answers, Mustaccio said. Then they took the same quiz again.

"It's all BS," said Robert Taylor, who worked at Glen Mills from 2006 until 2018, most recently as a senior counselor and acting team leader. "It's really just a big con. It's a big show."

'I learned to look the other way'

Students at Glen Mills who want to report their abuse know that the system works against them: They have to contend with complicit counselors and burdensome processes seemingly designed to stifle complaints.

Several former students told the Inquirer that counselors often ignored attacks, joined in, or even helped to hide evidence. In a 2011 sworn affidavit, one boy describes seeing staff throw away a bloody white T-shirt after a boy was assaulted in a locked room by four counselors.

Many counselors at Glen Mills won't report on their fellow staff members when they witness abuse for fear of getting ostracized, demoted, or fired, former staff said in interviews.

"I learned to look the other way when counselors hit kids," said McNear, the counselor terminated last summer. McNear never reported on his fellow counselors, whom he saw punch, kick, and choke kids. "They wouldn't promote me, or move me to a different building, or they'd call me a snitch," he said.

James Johnson was a student at Glen Mills who graduated in 2009 and worked as a counselor from 2010 to 2012, and again from 2014 to 2015. He decided to quit, he said, after staff beat up a child, knocking his eye nearly out of its socket, then confined the student in his room, and manipulated the log book to hide the abuse.

He described Glen Mills as a “secret society” or “mob” where counselors who didn’t go along with this behavior were punished.

By law, any counselor who suspects child abuse is required to immediately report it electronically or by calling ChildLine, the state’s 24-hour hotline. The Department of Human Services then conducts its own investigation to determine whether the complaint is real.

The Glen Mills process for addressing problems is vastly different. It lacks anonymity, insulates top leadership, and provides ample opportunity for a complaint to get dismissed.

Here’s how it works: Students are told to first report the problem to another student, “as a peer may be able to help resolve your grievance or give you helpful feedback.” If that fails, students must report to their counselor “within five days of the date when you felt a right had been violated.”

The counselor can dismiss the problem. But if the student presses the issue, his counselor is supposed to bring the complaint to the senior counselor. This is the first time it’s tracked or written down. The senior counselor is supposed to address the problem, then ask the student to sign a form saying his grievance is resolved.

If a student refuses to sign, the issue is reported to the team leader. Then the group living director. Then the executive director. At every stage, the student must push for another review, and is urged to sign the form saying the matter is resolved.

It is only then — after getting one’s complaint through six people — that “you will have the opportunity to talk with your Probation Officer or Worker.”

“I never heard of an employee reporting abuse,” said McNear, who worked at Glen Mills for three years. “They would only call Childline if it made them look good to do it.”

In its corrective action plan to DHS, Glen Mills leaders said they would hire an outside consultant to replace this student grievance procedure with a confidential process that would allow students “to feel empowered.”

As it stands now, Taylor said, the point of the “Glen Mills process” is to keep complaints from getting reported to DHS: “You keep it to yourself or go to your supervisor.”

Taylor was fired in June after more than a decade at Glen Mills. The school said he gave boys in his unit unauthorized haircuts; the counselor says he advocated too loudly for students’ rights, and is suing Glen Mills for wrongful termination.

Supervisors are told to “fix it,” said Taylor. “Get the kid to say whatever you need him to say.”

In 2011, when a counselor broke a Philadelphia teen’s elbow during a restraint, staff instructed Jamal Smith to tell the doctors he hurt himself playing sports, according to court records. The lie only fell apart

when the surgeon called Jamal's mother, who knew her son didn't have enough "status" to participate in athletics at Glen Mills.

In an interview, A.W. said that counselor Chris Medina and his supervisor, Jim Lindquist, both begged him to not pursue a report after his assault last summer. A.W. said Lindquist told him he'd be sent to a state detention center.

"He even told me that it would be worse because the food wouldn't be as good."

In the summer of 2017, boys in Fillmore Hall became so fearful for their safety that they decided to go straight to the top, according to documents obtained by the Inquirer.

They began slipping notes or letters under the door of Randy Ireson, saying a night-shift counselor was threatening to hurt them.

Desperate Pleas

In a note slipped under the door of executive director Randy Ireson in 2017, a student begs for help with a threatening counselor in his dorm. In 2011, a student dictated stories of violence to his lawyer when she came to see him at Glen Mills.

Fillmore Hall once again!

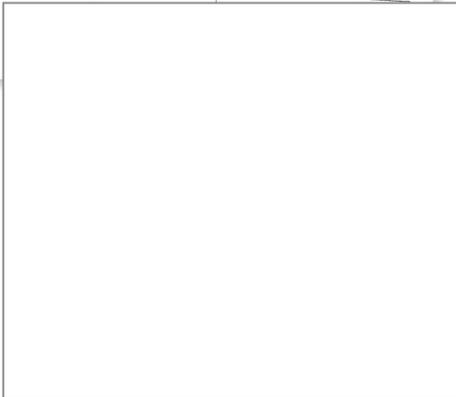
Us as students does n't feel
late around the clock. He be saying
we will punch us in the face and choke
us till we fall ~~and~~ and can't
wake up to me that sound like death
I want to tell my parents and no action
officer had gled this cause I think
I be sacred to fall to death in
I'm going get choke and I think
my steel but not a staff member the
that the police staff member the
that he act. He be saying to all the black
kids force up to work and clean up the
said. If we don't want to work he
will punch us. He force us to suite when
you come a home that he said I
we doesn't suite he will hit us the dirty
man. He said if he find out that we tell
I be nervous



and twisted my head and neck when
he grabbed my shield. My shirt ripped
and the collar was almost off the
shirt. I told my parents and my
father took a picture of my neck.
My jaw hurts and it is making
a cracking noise on the right side
every time I chew.

I have seen other kids get hit, too.
One kid, P bell, was coming up to
apologize and everyone was making fun of
him. A staff member grabbed him to
physically restrain him. But 4 guys went
into the office and closed the door. We heard
noises and him screaming. It was there like
10 minutes. When he came out he had blood
coming out his nose and he got a carpet
bun on his arm. The scar is still there. The
staff threw away his bloody white shirt.
Wishado
Favella K Bell

Oct. 5, 2011



I want to tell my parents and probation officer how Glen Mills is really like.

I be scared to fall [asleep] cause I think I'm gonna get choke to death...

A staff member grabbed him to physically restrain him. But 4 guys went into the office and closed the door. We heard noises and him screaming. He was there like 10 minutes. When he came out he had blood coming out his nose...

SOURCE: Inquirer and Daily News reporting

JON SNYDER / Staff Graphic

"He be saying he will punch us in the face and choke us till we fall asleep and can't wake up, to me that sound like death," [a handwritten letter](#) from Aug. 2, 2017, reads. "I want to tell my parents and probation officer how Glen Mills is really like."

Scatched out at the bottom of the page, the boy wrote: "Help us please Randy please."

The executive director's office was off-limits most of the time, but those who took nightly medication walked by his door as they passed through the administration building. Former students say they rarely, if ever, saw Ireson in person.

For a little while, the director instituted unscheduled checks of the hall where the allegedly threatening counselor worked. But quickly things went back to normal, and the counselor kept his job.

But there was one lasting change, counselors say: Ireson told his staff to reroute the boys. They no longer walk past his door: at night, during the day, on tours — never.

Pushed out for speaking up

Even the counselors who want to protect their students know top brass doesn't want their reports — and that if they force the issue, they'll end up forced out.

When a counselor broke a boy's elbow during Ireson's first month as director, and it came to the state's attention, officials there urged the new director to file a report of suspected child abuse. But Ireson refused, saying nothing improper had occurred.

"Understanding that you may not agree with this conclusion, please accept this note as an invitation to sit down at any time, with our respective legal counsel," Ireson told the state supervisor in a letter.

Lawrence Livers repeatedly tried to alert his supervisors to abusive behavior by other counselors, only to be ignored, he said in a lawsuit filed in November. When he reported a counselor whom he saw kick a student in the face in May 2017, Livers' supervisor said the counselor "must be having a bad day."

A month later, Livers saw the same supervisor choke a student for talking after curfew. When he told another supervisor about the abuse, he was met with shrugging shoulders, according to the lawsuit.

That July, Livers says he saw another counselor pin a student to the ground with his knee in the boy's chest while the boy screamed "I can't breathe!" Livers says he tried to report this to his supervisor, who replied, "[He] does that all the time."

Livers continued to see violence and attempt to report it through May 2018, when he says three staffers cornered and attacked a student. Two days later, Livers was abruptly fired — for allegedly failing to report a student injury.

How We Got the Story

Internal documents, court records, incident reports, and more than 40 interviews with students, staff, and others show top leaders turned a blind eye to the beatings and insulated themselves from reports.



SOURCE: Inquirer and Daily News reporting

JON SNYDER / Staff Graphic

In the last year, at least three former counselors have filed wrongful-termination suits against Glen Mills, saying school leaders punished them for failing to keep quiet about the violence. Others quit voluntarily for the same reason.

Jim Rostick worked at Glen Mills for more than a decade before he called ChildLine in June 2017 over the teen with the broken jaw. He was swiftly demoted from senior counselor to regular staff with no explanation, Rostick said in an interview.

"I know they demoted me for reporting it, for putting a black eye on the school," said Rostick, who quit three months later. "If this was a place where they punched and stepped on kids, I couldn't stay."

Few counselors know the consequences of reporting abuse better than Shawn Magee.

In late 2011, Magee witnessed his supervisor punch a boy in the face, breaking his glasses — then falsify Monroe Hall's log records to cover it up. According to court records, Magee reported this up the chain at Glen Mills, but the counselor, the boy, and witnesses all said nothing happened. So Magee did something bold: He reported it directly to the state. (In court records, Glen Mills claims it called the state.)

About 10 days later, he was called in to meet with Glen Mills' lawyer. It was, after all these years, Guy Vilim — the same attorney who stood with Ferrainola as Glen Mills staff tried to bar state troopers from the school in 2000.

According to Magee's testimony in a lawsuit against the school, Vilim walked into the room and shook Magee's hand. Then the lawyer took off his glasses, leaned back in his chair, and said, "Dude, what are you doing?" Leaning forward, he added: "You're pissing a lot of people off."

Magee says Vilim told him: "You know, this is your last chance to think about what you're going to say before you go into that meeting with [state investigators]. Because if you don't, you're going to be out of here within two to three months."

He shared what he saw happen anyway. Investigators checked the supervisor's phone records and found a 40-minute call from Magee that corroborated Magee's account. The student also came clean about what happened. The supervisor was fired in January.

But true to Vilim's threat, Magee didn't last much longer at Glen Mills either. He said he was immediately retaliated against, reprimanded by his new supervisor for things like not counting the pins used in the laundry. His bosses claim he became erratic.

It came to a head one day when a student told Magee his head had slammed into a water fountain during a restraint. The counselor alerted his supervisor, who told him to go home. Unable to sleep that night, and concerned for the boy's safety, Magee made late-night calls to ChildLine and members of the Glen Mills board of trustees.

Glen Mills fired Magee on Feb. 8, less than six weeks after Vilim took off his glasses and asked him what he was doing.

A lasting legacy

The nation's juvenile justice system is built on the belief that children can be saved, that they are young enough to change. The goal is not punishment, but rehabilitation, the redirection of criminal behavior so that the community becomes safer and these boys' lives become better.

In 2014, the U.S. House of Representatives honored Glen Mills for the "life-changing work it does for young men." The school has been open since the 1800s, churning out generations of boys, sculpting thousands of men.

But what has it made of them?

Some of them are not OK. Nathan Thomas, the boy with the heart condition, says he was depressed and hardly talked to anyone for years after he left Glen Mills. Now 23, he has nightmares that he is back in Lincoln Hall. Someone is always getting dragged to the refrigerator.

Richard Lewarski tells his own children about Glen Mills when they won't behave. He was spit on and choked in the early 2000s, a skinny 14-year-old from Cleveland, now 34. But it doesn't work; his daughter doesn't believe him, doesn't think a place like that could exist.

And in Santa Fe, N.M., a man named Eric Brams bolts up from another bad dream. He is 34 now, thousands of miles and nearly two decades away from what happened.



Courtesy Eric Brams

Eric Brams was a star swimmer and 2002 graduate of the Glen Mills Schools. He says he was violently assaulted one day by multiple counselors in the gymnasium.

It was the end of 2001 — one year after Glen Mills promised the state it would protect its boys — and Brams was playing basketball in the gymnasium. Another student ran up and said he was wearing the wrong shoes. Boys have to wear white- or clear-soled shoes on the court.

In an interview, Brams said he was confused; he had been careful to wear the proper footwear. But he went to go speak with the counselor who had sent the student. “Excuse me, can I introduce myself?” he said, following the school’s protocol for addressing staff. “My name is Eric Brams, I live in Buchanan Hall, and I’m from Montgomery County, Pennsylvania —”

Those are the last words Brams could utter before the staffer, one of the biggest counselors at the school, picked him up in the air and threw him down on the court. Several other counselors came running.

Brams says he went limp, as though he were playing dead, as the counselors took turns lifting him high, then slamming him down, over and over.

Afterward, on each side of his back, under his armpits, was a bruised outline of four fingers where the men had gripped him. On both sides of his chest: a perfect thumb.

For three weeks, he could barely walk. He tried not to think about what had triggered the attack. He had heard that counselors sometimes took out their own frustrations on boys for no reason. But what he eventually learned still shocked him.

Brams was a star swimmer on the Glen Mills team. At the regional competition, one of his team’s student-managers said his counselor was the one who first attacked Brams.

“That dude doesn’t like anyone from Montgomery County,” the student explained. “That day he told our hall, ‘If you see any of those pussies, send them my way.’ ”

Brams says he was named Glen Mills’ 2002 Student Athlete of the Year. He graduated with a college scholarship. By most measures, he was a success story — the reason faraway delegations came touring, that the U.S. Congress gave honors.

But all these years later, when he wakes up from the nightmares, it’s not the accolades or the podiums he remembers.

It’s the fear.



HEATHER KHALIFA / Staff Photographer

A.W. says he has nightmares about the violence he experienced at Glen Mills last summer.