

My name is Deirdre Sugiuchi. I am a writer and former librarian from Athens, Georgia testifying on behalf of survivors of the troubled teen industry. I am a survivor of a troubled teen facility.

On January 4, 1990, I boarded a plane for the Dominican Republic. I thought I was going to a Christian boarding school. Instead I found myself at Escuela Caribe, a fundamentalist Christian boot camp. At this school my fellow students and I were forced to exercise for punishment, sometimes until we vomited or collapsed from exhaustion. Students were beaten with a leather strap for minor infractions. Staff members would slam students into the wall if they thought we were out of line. At this school, students of color were punished more severely than white students, we were all taught that homosexuality was immoral, equated with pedophilia or bestiality, and we girls were taught that having sexual feelings meant we were whores. At this school all contact, especially amongst students, was monitored, meaning there was no way for any of us to tell our families we were being abused. When my peers and I were physically, sexually and emotionally abused, we were told that we had brought our mistreatment upon us, because of our sinful nature. We were told our mistreatment was done in the name of the Lord.

While at this school I witnessed students being physically abused regularly on a daily basis. Like them, I was also physically abused and forced to take part in strenuous exercise drills and physical labor. While at the school, I witnessed a student being sexually assaulted. I reported the assault. Nothing was done. A male staff member regularly watched me change clothes. I had no way to ask him to stop. I once witnessed a girl being made to urinate on herself because the staff member in charge did not like the tone she used when she asked permission to use the bathroom. While at this school, I was coerced into policing my fellow students. I was forced to monitor them in the shower. I was even forced to make sure that the girls who were showering soaped their pubic hair, a task I now suspect was a form of aversion therapy.

After I graduated from my program, I was highly traumatized, I was stalked by a twice convicted rapist. However, I was privileged in that I had support from my grandparents. And despite the abysmal education I received via Abeka and ACE curriculum, I went on to earn my M.Ed. in Education.

I have written essays for Huffington Post, Dame Magazine, Religion Dispatches, and the anthology Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church about the trauma I suffered from my experience at this unregulated religious reform school. I also have maintained a blog, Unreformed, for over a decade, and am in the process of completing a memoir about my experience in the unregulated troubled teen industry.

Since as early as 1974, the year I was born, when Senator Sam Ervin held a hearing on "Individual Rights and the Federal Role in Behavior Modification," it has been proven time and again that troubled teen facilities, be they secular or religious, enact change by utilizing brutal confrontations, isolation, rigid restriction and gradual restoration of limited freedom. The power imbalance in such an environment allows physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to go unchecked, especially when we deny, time and again, the existence of wolves in sheep's clothing who prey on innocent children.

Members of the Oregon legislature, thank you for holding this hearing. I am begging you on behalf of the children enrolled in Oregon residential treatment facilities to please provide necessary oversight to protect children from being abused. Their future rests in your hands.

More information can be found at www.deirdresugiuchi.com