

State looks into school abuse claim

Prineville's Mount Bachelor Academy for troubled teens is target of DHS investigation

By [Keith Chu](#) / *The Bulletin*

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A Prineville private school for troubled teens is being investigated for alleged mistreatment of students in its care, the Oregon Department of Human Services confirmed Saturday.

Department spokesman Gene Evans would not discuss details of the allegations against Mount Bachelor Academy. He issued a written statement Saturday morning.

“There are two concurrent assessments underway involving Mount Bachelor Academy — one regarding reports DHS has received of child abuse and one regarding the school’s license,” Evans wrote. “We cannot comment on the details or timeline of the assessments while they are ongoing. When they are concluded, there may be information that can be shared.”

Mount Bachelor Academy Executive Director Sharon Bitz denied any wrongdoing and said school officials are cooperating with state investigators. “They’ve come in to do a review, and all we’ve been told is there is an allegation of abuse. They have not identified any person or any thing to us,” Bitz said. “We believe the allegation to be false and unfounded.”

Mount Bachelor Academy houses about 80 students in a facility east of Prineville. The 20-year-old residential school is not connected to the Crook County School District.

Two former students who spoke with *The Bulletin* said physical and emotional discipline was common at the private boarding school.

Fembe Adamou, 18, left the school about two weeks ago, she said. Adamou’s parents sent her to the school when she was 15, after she became involved with drugs and performed badly at her previous high school. Adamou said her problems dated back to a sexual assault against her as a young teen.

Adamou said the academy didn’t help her with her scars from that experience. It made them worse.

She said her worst experience at the academy came in a role-playing game called “venture” in November 2007. The game — in a group setting — was designed to help kids overcome past problems.

“(Students) have to dress up in costumes, and whatever costume they chose for you, you have to do it,” Adamou said. “They gave me a job as a French maid.”

The costume made Adamou uncomfortable, she said.

“The shirt was like as long as my bra. I had to wear 4-inch high heels with fishnets. My skirt — you could see my butt,” Adamou said in a telephone interview from El Salvador, where she is now living with her parents.

She and another girl were then told to dance for instructors and students, Adamou said.

“They would play dirty songs by Salt-N-Pepa or ‘Milkshake,’” a popular song by Kelis, Adamou said. “I had to go and give guys lap dances.”

Bitz said she couldn’t speak to the allegation, but said that Adamou is an unreliable source of information, and her story is “very suspect.”

“I can’t answer that at this point,” Bitz said, when asked about the role-playing session. “I was not present in her workshop.”

Andrew Friedman was a student at Mount Bachelor Academy for more than two years. Friedman, who left about a year ago and now attends San Diego State University, said he was present at the sessions where Adamou was made to dance.

“You cannot make a girl get into little skimpy outfits and give lap dances to people,” Friedman said.

Susan Owren, who is currently a van driver for the school, said she had been told similar stories by other students and has seen instructors make crude comments to girls there.

“It’s common practice for them to use vulgar language to kids on a daily basis,” Owren said. “I can’t even repeat the stuff I hear.”

Adamou said she was told by instructors that she “put (herself) out there” to be assaulted and was ordered to smear mud on her body to illustrate the fact that she was “dirty.”

Positive experience

Ivy Kessel, whose daughter is attending Mount Bachelor Academy, said her family’s experience with the school has been entirely positive. Kessel, a Los Angeles attorney, sent her daughter there nine months ago to treat her anorexia and cocaine addiction.

“She has just thrived there,” Kessel said of her 17-year-old daughter.

Her daughter has regained weight and is now “like her old self,” Kessel said. The girl never mentioned any inappropriate treatment of girls, Kessel said. If some of the academy’s techniques are unusual, that can be called for to treat troubled kids, she said.

“If you have a troubled teen, that teen can use a healthy dose of indoctrination,” Kessel said.

In a letter to DHS, Kessel defended the “venture” treatment, saying that costumes are designed to externalize the internal struggles of teens.

“(S)tudents may be dressed in a clown costume, or girls with body image issues may be (dressed) in swimsuit attire as part of their Lifestep experience, (which) allows these students to put their negative thinking patterns ‘out there’ for their peer group to evaluate and then allow the students to realize that their peers accept them for who they are on the inside, not what they look like on the outside,” she wrote. “Your investigator’s reliance on the explanation from troubled teens about the therapeutic activities at MBA is like asking a sick person how it feels to be healthy.”

Friedman said he was punished for arriving two minutes late for a meeting with two weeks of shoveling snow all day. Other punishments included sleep deprivation and isolation from other students, he said.

Bitz said that Friedman’s story was “an exaggeration.”

“Students have consequences for bad behavior, but we don’t abuse children,” Bitz said. “We have a 20-year reputation that demonstrates that.”

The academy’s Web site describes its philosophy: “Our methods emphasize acquisition of self-awareness and self-esteem, and the development of problem-solving and decision-making skills through experiential learning. Students deal with situational living, as well as personal issues in communication skills groups two to three times weekly.”

Allegations in 1998

These are not the first allegations of abuse at Mount Bachelor Academy.

Former employees at the academy told The Bulletin in 1998 that students were “subjected to frequent obscenity-laced screaming sessions by staff members; students are deprived of sleep; a group of girls emerged from one group therapy session with bruising on their arms after they were ordered to clasp their hands in front of them and pound a mattress for an extended period; and another group of girls on a backwoods ‘intervention’ outing (was) roused from their sleeping bags at midnight and forced to remove rocks from a dirt road for two hours in the middle of a cold October night,” according to Bulletin reports at the time.

Parents of two students at the school at that time corroborated the staff members’ allegations, but later that year, the Oregon DHS determined the school was “a safe environment” for children.

Owren, the van driver, said she has seen students locked in their rooms for several hours as punishment and denied food for up to eight hours at a time.

Friedman and Adamou said students were unable to leave the school or contact family members when they felt uncomfortable about practices at Mount Bachelor Academy. Telephone calls home were strictly limited and monitored by school staff, the students said and Owren confirmed.

If Friedman, Adamou and Owren's stories are true, those techniques didn't serve any therapeutic purpose, said Dr. Pamela Birrell, a clinical psychologist at the University of Oregon.

"There's nothing standard about those techniques," Birrell said.

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