

JANET HEIMLICH

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SUPREME COURT OF TEXAS
BLAKE A. HAWTHORNE, CLERK

May 24, 2018

Mr. Blake A. Hawthorne
Clerk, Supreme Court of Texas
Supreme Court Building
201 W. 14th Street, Room 104

Cause No. 17-1005: *In Re John Doe, Individually and As Next Friend For John Doe, Jr., in the Supreme Court of Texas; Original Proceeding from the Fifth Court of Appeals, Dallas, Texas.*

Dear Mr. Hawthorne:

I would appreciate your distribution of this amicus letter submitted in the above matter to the Justices of the Supreme Court of Texas.

I am the author of the book, *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment*, which has been praised by faith leaders and child advocates, such as Bishop John Shelby Spong and the late Princeton Theology Seminary professor, Donald Capps. I am also the founder and a board member of the Child-Friendly Faith Project (CFFP), a national nonprofit organization that raises awareness of religious child maltreatment.

Through my work with the CFFP, I have strived to educate faith communities, professionals, and the general public about the issue of religious child maltreatment, as well as support survivors. My advocacy work is neither faith-based, nor anti-religion. Rather, like the CFFP, I support a religious

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organization's First Amendment right for its members to practice and adhere to the religious faith that is meaningful to them. I have worked with the country's foremost authorities on child abuse and neglect, some of whom include faith leaders, to better understand the risk factors behind maltreatment that is enabled by, or justified with, religious belief—maltreatment that can occur in homes, places of worship, or faith-based institutions. Based on my experiences as a researcher of abuse cases and as an advocate for child victims and adult survivors, I submit this amicus curiae letter to the Supreme Court of Texas in support of the Petition for Writ of Mandamus filed by John Doe, Individually and as Next of Friend for John Doe, Jr. I have not received any monetary contribution for the preparation or submission of this letter.

My work with the CFFP involves researching and tracking cases of religious child maltreatment throughout the US, as well as internationally. Sadly, as with state-run and private childcare organizations, many children are mistreated in faith-based organizations and institutions. From dozens of interviews of survivors and experts that I have conducted, as well as a plethora of studies and criminal cases I have read, it's clear that adults in faith-based institutions, sometimes with good intentions, harm children in the midst of adhering to certain religious or cultural beliefs and practices. I have become aware of disturbing accounts of adults using religious messaging to control and terrify children, justifying abusive physical

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punishment with scriptural passages, denying children necessary medical care based on religious doctrines, and refusing to report religious authorities who have sexually abused children. The impacts of such maltreatment can have serious long-term effects and can even be fatal. There is a spiritual cost, too, as many child victims and adults survivors abandon their religious and spiritual beliefs due to what they suffered in childhood.

As an example, I assisted in recently uncovering cases in which children living at the faith-based residential program Cal Farley's Boys Ranch outside Amarillo, Texas, suffered ongoing and severe physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect over a period of at least forty years. On December 20, 2017, after stories describing the abuses had been published and broadcast by local, state, national and international news organizations, the CEO of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch publicly acknowledged, and apologized for, what the children had suffered. A copy of one story that appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* is attached.

Tragically, the abuses that occurred at that institution are not unique, nor are they relics of the past. For years, children at the faith-based Rebekah Home for Girls also suffered unspeakable abuses, during a time that Texas had relaxed regulations of faith-based residential institutions. (See attached *Texas Monthly* article.) At this time, there is evidence that children in Texas are not being adequately protected from abuse. As a story from the radio program the "Texas

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Standard” revealed earlier this year (see attached), Texas has the highest number of inappropriate student-teacher relations in the country. Although the Texas legislature has passed laws in an effort to address this issue, the fact remains that too many of our state’s children are at risk of enduring severe trauma at the hands of those who are responsible for providing them a safe environment.

My interest in filing this letter is to call attention to the far-reaching harm that could result from the Dallas Court of Appeals’ decision. The implications of the lower court’s ruling goes well beyond whether an individual should or should not be expelled from a secondary school because of inappropriate behavior. While there are a multitude of factors that lead to cases of child abuse and neglect, nearly all problems arise, and are allowed to continue, due to a lack of accountability. Therefore, exempting faith-based institutions from any judicial intervention would only exacerbate maltreatment. If the lower court’s opinion stands, it could serve as the basis for allowing private schools and other organizations claiming a religious affiliation to avoid liability for the mistreatment and abuse of children simply by claiming that their conduct concerns their “internal affairs.”

I understand that the First Amendment protects a religious institution’s right to determine their membership and leaders when that membership is based on religious doctrine and standards, but private schools and organizations that make promises to parents about the specific care and education they will provide should

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not be permitted to wave the flag of religion to avoid being held accountable for the mistreatment of children through disciplinary measures or other actions. I believe this would actually violate the First Amendment, as it would expose children to harm, including illegal acts, ones that, in my experience, only the judicial system may be able to redress and stop.

I urge Your Honors to grant the Does' Petition so that the Court can speak about whether and when the "ecclesiastical abstention doctrine" applies to private schools and organizations.

Sincerely,

/s/ Janet Heimlich
Janet Heimlich

JANET HEIMLICH

CERTIFICATION OF AMICUS

I certify on behalf of Amicus Curiae that I have not received any monetary contribution for the preparation or submission of this letter.

/s/ Janet Heimlich
Janet Heimlich

CERTIFICATION OF COMPLIANCE

I certify on behalf of Amicus Curiae that the body of this Amicus letter contains 961 words according to the word count feature of the software used to prepare this Amicus letter.

/s/ Janet Heimlich
Janet Heimlich

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that a true and correct copy of this letter was served via electronic service on the following counsel of record on May 24, 2018.

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/s/ Janet Heimlich

Janet Heimlich, Founder and Board Member
The Child-Friendly Faith Project



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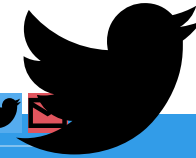
MY ACCOUNT

NEWS

Amarillo Area Boys Ranch apologized for decades of physical sexual abuse of at- risk youths



*Marc Ramirez, Breaking News
Reporter*



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Leaders of a Texas institution for at-risk kids have acknowledged and apologized for decades of physical and sexual abuse, the *Amarillo Globe-News* [reported](#).

The abuse at Cal Farley's Boys Ranch, northwest of Amarillo, endured through the early 1990s, made public Wednesday in a [report](#) published by *The Guardian*. The newspaper interviewed eight men who accused former Boys Ranch staff members of propagating systemic abuse that affected hundreds of children.

Later that afternoon, according to the *Globe-News*, officials issued a statement from Dan Adams, president and CEO of the nondenominational organization, saying its board of directors was aware of the claims.

"Thousands of people have found hope and healing at Cal Farley's Boys Ranch, both past and present," Adams wrote. "Tragically, not everyone who participated in our programs through the years

was helped by them. No words by me or anyone else will change that. For those who left Boys Ranch having experienced abuse of any form, I am truly sorry."

Cal Farley was a former professional wrestler and tire salesman who in the 1930s ran a sports club for troubled boys in the Amarillo region before acquiring the land to build the ranch.

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The men interviewed by *The Guardian* described incidents that dated as far back as the 1950s. They spoke of being severely overworked and beaten until they bled, of being run over by horses or having their pets killed. One said he was raped by another boy at the ranch, while another said he and three others, all minors, had sex with a staff member's wife.

Ed Cargill, now living in New Mexico, said he tried to escape the ranch several times to flee the abuse but was caught and punished every time.

The last time, he said, he was halfway to Amarillo on foot when ranch staff tracked him down using a helicopter. Two staffers, he said, "took me 10 miles away from the ranch, and made me run in front of these horses all the way back. Anytime I floundered, they'd hit me with coiled-up rope or run me over with the damn horse."

Such claims were first pursued by former journalist Janet Heimlich of Child-Friendly Faith Project, an Austin-based nonprofit that exposes child abuse by religious groups, *The Guardian* said.



In a 1997 photo, Cal Farley's Boys Ranch Superintendent Lamont Waldrip (right) looks

It was hearing that the ranch planned to name a new \$1 million dormitory after longtime superintendent Lamont Waldrip, who some say administered the worst of the abuse, that prompted some to come forward.

Adams, while admitting that abuse had happened in prior decades, said he didn't plan to change those plans.

"I don't say it's hearsay, and I don't deny it," he told the newspaper. "It's not that I don't believe it. It's just that it's past."

over a 1956 Boys Ranch High School yearbook with wife Frances. Lamont retired that same year after 42 years as superintendent.(File Photo/The Associated Press)

Amarillo's ABC affiliate, KVII-TV, [published](#) an anonymous statement about the claims that it attributed to a former Boys Ranch resident.

"I'll never understand what we did wrong to deserve the abusive treatment that was so prevalent in those days: hitting, punching, slapping, choking, kicking and roping children from a horse and dragging them back to the ranch and then beating them," the statement read in part. As adults "we were either too afraid to say anything or more afraid of what we might do if we dwelled on it too much."

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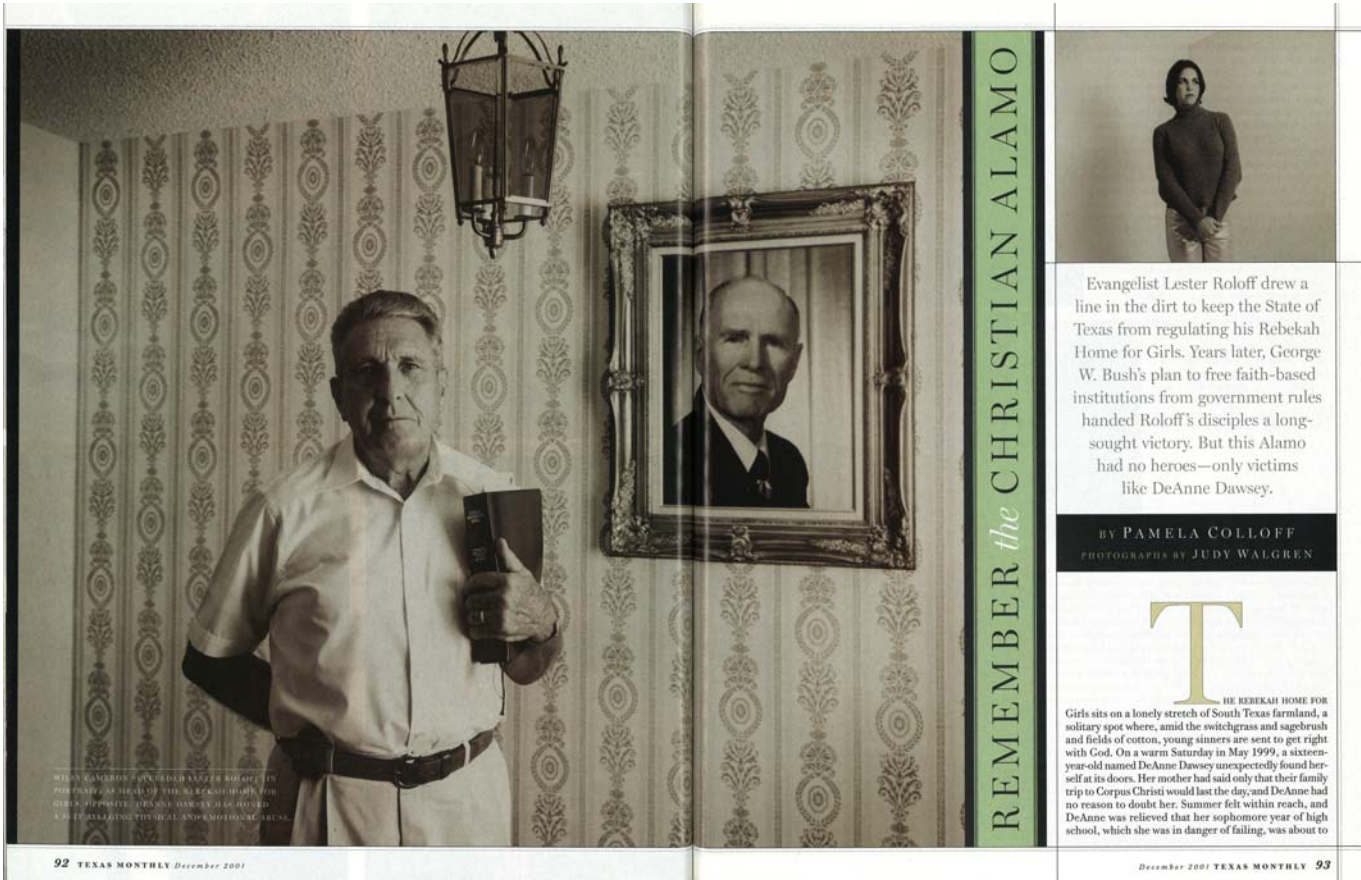
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Remember the Christian Alamo

Evangelist Lester Roloff drew a line in the dirt to keep the State of Texas from regulating his Rebekah Home for Girls. Years later, George W. Bush’s plan to free faith-based institutions from government rules handed Roloff’s disciples a long-sought victory. But this Alamo had no heroes—only victims like DeAnne Dawsey.

by PAMELA COLLOFF | DECEMBER 2001 | 129 COMMENTS



Wiley Cameron succeeded Lester Roloff (in portrait) as head of the Rebekah Home. Right: DeAnne Dawsey has joined a suit alleging physical and emotional abuse.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUDY WALGREN

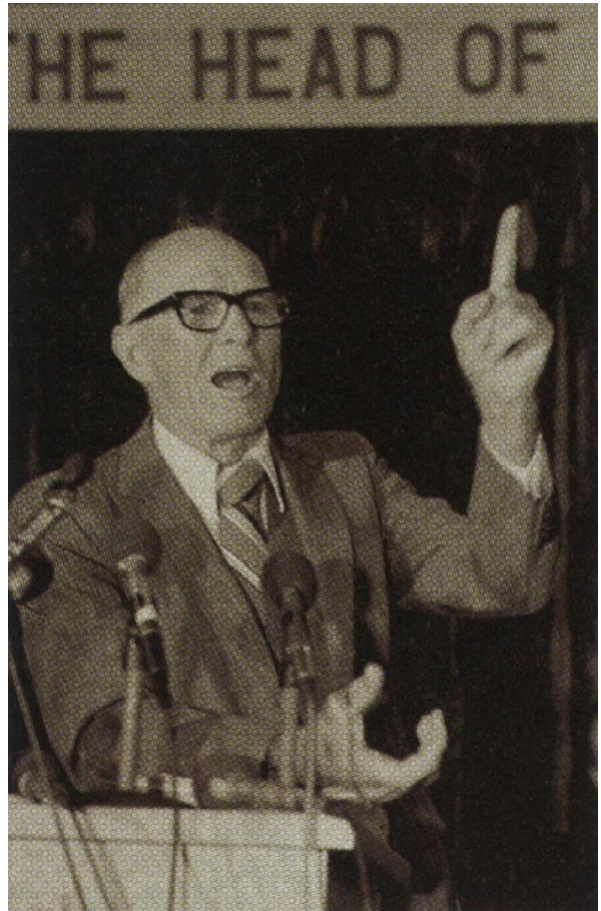


he Rebekah Home for Girls sits on a lonely stretch of South Texas farmland, a solitary spot where, amid the switchgrass and sagebrush and fields of cotton, young sinners are sent to get right with God. On a warm Saturday in May 1999, a sixteen-year-old named DeAnne Dawsey unexpectedly found herself at its doors. Her mother had said only that their family trip to Corpus Christi would last the day, and DeAnne had no reason to doubt her. Summer felt within reach, and DeAnne was relieved that her sophomore year of high school, which she was in danger of failing, was about to end. She was a slight girl with blue-gray eyes and dark brown hair who always wore a diamond-studded heart necklace. An inveterate flirt—"All she thought about was boys," her mother would later lament—DeAnne never ignored an admiring glance. Normally she was too restless to stay still for long, but that morning she was in a dark mood: She and her boyfriend had quarreled the night before, and she sat brooding in the back seat of her mother's car, lost in thought.

She was so preoccupied that she shrugged off a telling remark that her grandfather, who was traveling with them, had made after leaving Houston. Like DeAnne's mother, he did not know much about the Rebekah Home for Girls or its history: that it was the most famous, and infamous, of the homes for troubled teenagers founded by the late evangelist Lester Roloff; or that punitive "Bible discipline" was the method used to chasten girls who had fallen from grace; or that the home had been the center of an epic, twelve-year battle between church and state—culminating in a standoff that Roloff called the Christian Alamo—in which the maverick preacher and his successors fought to avoid regulation by the State of Texas. But DeAnne's grandfather felt guilty enough for lying to her about the purpose of the day's trip that he turned in his seat to face her. "I'm sorry we're doing this to you," he said softly. "I'm so sorry."

AT THE HEART OF LESTER ROLOFF'S BATTLE with the State of Texas were his homes for troubled teenagers: reformatories where "parent-hating, Satan-worshipping, dope-taking immoral boys and girls," as Roloff described his charges, were turned into "faithful servants of the Lord." Roloff's method of Bible discipline, which he said was rooted in Scripture, meant kneeling for hours on hardwood floors, licks meted out with a pine paddle or a leather strap, and the dreaded "lockup," an isolation room where Roloff's sermons were played for days on end. The state spent much of the seventies and early eighties fighting Roloff in court, insisting that he obtain a license for his youth homes and submit to state oversight. The preacher countered that he answered to a higher power and that his homes were licensed by God. Not until 1985 did the state prevail, forcing the Rebekah Home to shut its doors. At the time, no one anticipated that the political capital of faith-based social programs would rise dramatically in the next decade, or that Roloff's beliefs, which were far afield of the religious mainstream, would

gain a new foothold. But in 1997 then-governor George W. Bush put forth a legislative package that included precisely what Roloff had long fought for: allowing church-run child-care institutions to opt out of state licensing. By 1999 the Rebekah Home was back in business—and the stories of DeAnne Dawsey’s troubled adolescence, Lester Roloff’s crusade, and George W. Bush’s political career would converge.



Lester Roloff in 1981.

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Lester Roloff, the man behind this long struggle, felt the call to preach in 1932, when he was eighteen and living on his family’s farm near Dawson, about thirty miles northeast of Waco. He had always been a sickly child, but one night, as he lay in bed gravely ill, he was filled with a sense of foreboding. He later said of that dark hour, “I promised the Lord, ‘If you let me wake up in the morning, I’ll be a preacher.’” After he recovered, he began hauling hay and picking cotton to pay for his Baylor University tuition. The next year, he took his Jersey cow, Marie, with him to college. He sold fresh milk to pay for his room and board, and when he had to deliver his first sermon during his freshman year, he memorized it and recited it to the cow. He was unschooled in his craft, but he had a gift. Soon he was leading revivals around Waco, bringing people to their feet as they shouted and wept. In tiny Purdon more than a hundred people declared themselves born

again, and according to Roloff lore, the town's gambling hall closed and the bootlegger went out of business.

As a young preacher he pastored Baptist churches in small towns like Shiloh and Navarro Mills and Trinidad, but he hungered for a larger audience. During World War II, he moved to Corpus Christi, then home to the largest naval air station in the world, with thousands of Navy recruits; the port city, he remarked to his wife, was "a field ripe for harvest." He began broadcasting a daily radio show, "Family Altar," in which he sang gospel songs and condemned whiskey drinking, among other vices. The show was soon picked up by KWBU, a 50,000-watt station owned by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which broadcast it to 22 states. More and more listeners tuned in, and Roloff began evangelizing full-time, driving around in a "gospel van" equipped with loudspeakers and an organ and holding tent meetings that drew thousands. Before huge crowds, he cried, he exhorted, he swayed, he sang—and Roloff Evangelistic Enterprises was born.

An unabashed showman, Roloff enjoyed playing the part of the provocateur, but his audacity would cause him to fall out of favor with Baptist leaders. He raised eyebrows in 1945 when he argued that Baylor should not give President Harry Truman an honorary degree because he used rough language, going so far as to argue his case before the Baptist General Convention of Texas. In 1954 he garnered more adverse publicity when his neighbors in Corpus Christi complained that his use of loudspeakers at a revival was causing a public disturbance and the police agreed; Roloff denounced their order to keep the noise down as a threat to religious liberty and suggested that his neighbors were communists. His break with the Baptist General Convention of Texas came the following year, when he was banned from KWBU for broadcasting disparaging remarks about his Baptist brethren and for claiming that he was one of the few ministers to preach the true Gospel. By the time he returned to Waco to preach in 1956, no church would sponsor him. But amid the controversy, his radio audience grew and grew: His show was carried again nationally, and by 1958 he was traveling so much for his ministry—100,000 miles or more a year—that he bought and began piloting his own plane.

He parlayed his traveling tent revival into a multimillion-dollar enterprise by founding the reformatories he called the Roloff Homes and asking his radio listeners for "love gifts" to sustain them. The adult homes—the City of Refuge, the Lighthouse, and the Jubilee Home for Ladies—ministered to alcoholics, drug addicts, and petty criminals who straightened their lives out with Scripture, hard work, and clean living. The Anchor Home ministered to boys, and the Bethesda Home to pregnant teenage girls. But his greatest success was with the Rebekah Home for Girls, which he founded in 1967. The

Rebekah Home took in fallen girls from “jail houses, broken homes, hippie hives, and dope dives” who were “walking through the wilderness of sin,” he told his radio listeners. Roloff remade these “terminal cases” into Scripture-quoting, gospel-singing believers. Girls who had been saved harmonized along with his Honeybee Quartet at revivals and witnessed to the power of the Lord on his radio show. He showed off his Rebekah girls at every turn, and he was amply rewarded: Each day, packages arrived at Roloff Evangelistic Enterprises laden with checks, cash, jewelry, the family silver—whatever the faithful could provide.

Discipline at the Rebekah Home was rooted in a verse from Proverbs: “Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die.” The dictum was liberally applied. Local authorities first investigated possible abuse at the Rebekah Home in 1973, when parents who were visiting their daughter reported seeing a girl being whipped. When welfare workers attempted to inspect the home, Roloff refused them entry on the grounds that it would infringe on the separation between church and state. Attorney General John Hill promptly filed suit against Roloff Evangelistic Enterprises, introducing affidavits from sixteen Rebekah girls who said they had been whipped with leather straps, beaten with paddles, handcuffed to drainpipes, and locked in isolation cells—sometimes for such minor infractions as failing to memorize a Bible passage or forgetting to make a bed. Roloff defended these methods as good old-fashioned discipline, solidly supported by Scripture, and denied that any treatment at Rebekah constituted abuse. During an evidentiary hearing, he made his position clear by declaring, “Better a pink bottom than a black soul.” Attorney General Hill bluntly replied that it wasn’t pink bottoms he objected to, but ones that were blue, black, and bloody.

Still refusing to submit his youth homes to state oversight, Roloff met with Hill, and with the Honeybee Quartet in tow, he prayed and wept for the salvation of Hill’s soul. Unmoved, Hill pressed his case, and in 1974 a state district judge found Roloff in contempt of court, sentencing the preacher to five days behind bars. Roloff headed off to jail—as he would two more times during the state’s long-running case against him—wearing a smile, his well-worn Bible tucked under his arm.



A woman testifies about her life before she came to the Jubilee Home For Ladies.

DEANNE REALIZED SOMETHING WAS AMISS that spring day in 1999 when, outside Corpus Christi, they turned off the empty two-lane highway and stopped abruptly at a guardhouse. Their family day trip was not, to DeAnne's knowledge, supposed to include this detour. Stark farmland stretched in all directions, and beyond the guardhouse stood a large, white brick church—"Christ is the Answer" its sign proclaimed—that dominated the landscape. Off to the right, DeAnne could see a vast two-story dormitory that looked incongruous against the wide-open sky, its facade bearing the words "Rebekah Home for Girls" in black script. In that moment, DeAnne knew she had been lied to. For months her mother had been threatening to send her away to boarding school: DeAnne had been running wild, in her mother's eyes, skipping school and spending too much time with her boyfriend, who her mother felt certain was using drugs. High-spirited and restless, DeAnne resented her mother's scrutiny. She had run away from home once, and she wanted nothing more than to escape the seemingly repressive rules that her mother had laid out at home. But in that moment, as DeAnne went pale in the back seat of the car,

she knew she was trapped. “Don’t do this to me,” she pleaded with her mother as two guards approached the car. “Please don’t leave me here.”

AS HIS CASE MADE ITS WAY THROUGH THE COURTS, Lester Roloff found himself besieged in the political arena as well. In 1973 the Texas Legislature held hearings on the practices of the Rebekah Home and other unlicensed homes for youth. One Rebekah girl recounted how a whipping she had received for smoking a cigarette left welts on her body that were an inch high. The revelations led the Legislature to pass the Child Care Licensing Act, which required all child-care facilities to be licensed by the state. Roloff refused to abide by it on the grounds that it conflicted with his free exercise of religion. “I have no right to go by the Welfare Department’s little brown book,” he quipped, “so long as I have the big black Book.”

In need of a political ally, Roloff found one in Governor Bill Clements, whom he affectionately called Brother Bill. Deftly using the bully pulpit, Roloff had urged his radio listeners to vote for Clements, who was running against Roloff’s old adversary, John Hill, in 1978; when Hill lost by 18,000 votes, Roloff credited himself with delivering the votes that made Clements the first Republican governor of Texas since Reconstruction. Clements subsequently praised Roloff’s work and accused the state of “nitpicking” in its case against him. With the governor on his side, the preacher continued to flagrantly flout the law—most memorably when he explained why he had not reported an attempted murder at the Rebekah Home to local authorities. “We had a prayer meeting the night it happened,” he explained. “We reported it to Him.” All the while, he sought to curry favor in the court of public opinion, casting himself as David fighting Goliath, waging a battle against state authorities on behalf of the children. He distributed photos of a girl strapped to a cross in which he stood beside her, draped in the American flag and brandishing a Bible. “It’s not a sixty-four-year-old preacher that’s being crucified [by state licensing requirements], it’s little boys and girls,” he would cry.

A series of defeats in the courtroom would soon set the stage for the Christian Alamo. Roloff had kept his homes open by appealing a state district court’s order to close them—but an appellate court upheld this order in 1977, describing Roloff’s claim that state regulation would conflict with his free exercise of religion as “nothing more than a bald conclusion entirely unsupported by any factual evidence.” The Supreme Court of Texas agreed, and in 1979 another state district judge ordered Roloff Evangelistic Enterprises to obtain licenses for its homes or close them. Still Roloff did not yield. “They’ll hang black crepe on Heaven’s gate if they close these homes,” fumed Roloff. Hundreds of his supporters massed around the Rebekah Home, on Roloff’s 557-acre compound south of

Corpus Christi, linking arms and forming a human barricade to prevent state officials from moving in.

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A standoff ensued, with church and state encamped on opposite sides of the South Texas farmland. The three-day stalemate ended when Roloff agreed to close his youth homes and send his Rebekah girls—his “prisoners of war”—to youth homes out of the state. But he was not defeated; he was simply biding his time. He restructured his ministry, placing his youth homes under the auspices of his People’s Baptist Church rather than Roloff Evangelistic Enterprises—a device that allowed his homes to reopen that fall. Lester Roloff had stared down the State of Texas—and for the time being, he had won.

LONG BEFORE DEANNE DAWSEY CAME to the Rebekah Home, a succession of girls had stared out of its dormitory windows at a world that lay just beyond reach and dreamed of running. Only a few got away, tearing through the tall grass to Farm Road 665 and thumbing rides to Corpus Christi. So many girls tried to run from the home over the years that its caretakers took precautions—putting up a six-foot fence, rigging the windows with alarms, and wiring the girls’ bedrooms with intercoms so they could listen for any plans of escape. Punishment for even talking about running was so severe that most girls learned to accept their lot, turning away from the windows that looked out onto Farm Road 665 and allowing only their thoughts to roam.

The Rebekah Home was bent on driving sin from even the wickedest of girls and making them see the light of God. Jo Ann Edwards was brought to the Rebekah Home in 1982, after running away from home at the age of thirteen. “I was an acolyte at my church before I went there, and God was very close to me in my heart,” she said in a phone interview from her home in Victoria, where she is the mother of five children. “But that place turned me against Him for a while and made me very hard. I thought that even He had left me.” As a new girl, she was scrutinized by “helpers,” the saved girls who handed out demerits for misbehavior. Demerits were given for an endless host of wrongdoings: talking about “worldly” things, singing songs other than gospel songs, speaking too loudly, doodling, nail biting, looking at boys in church, failing to snitch on other sinners. Each demerit earned her a lick, which the Rebekah Home’s housemother administered with a wood paddle. The beatings left her black and blue. “I got twenty licks my first

time, and I was hit hard—so hard that I couldn't sit for days,” Jo Ann said. “I begged [the housemother] to stop. When she was done, she hugged me and said, ‘God loves you.’ She told me to go back to the living room and read Scripture and sing ‘Amazing Grace’ with the other girls.”

Only Rebekah girls who had proven their devotion by repeatedly testifying to God's grace could avoid Bible discipline. Some girls were genuinely troubled teenagers who had gotten mixed up with drugs or prostitution; others had been caught having sex; many were guilty of nothing more than growing up in abusive homes. Tara Cummings, now 31 and a mortgage consultant in Chicago, was sent there by her father, a preacher, whose beatings had left her badly bruised. Even she was not immune to judgment. “I was told that I was a reprobate, that I was beyond help and was going to hell,” she said. She was treated to the full range of the Rebekah Home's punishments, which were not limited to lickings. “Confinement” meant spending weeks hanging her head without speaking. “Sitting on the wall” required sitting with her back against a wall and without the support of a chair, even as her legs buckled beneath her. But kneeling was what she most dreaded. Kneeling could last for as long as five hours at a time; she might have to kneel while holding a Bible on each outstretched palm or with pencils wedged beneath her knees. Only girls seen as inveterate sinners received the full brunt of the home's crueler punishments. “You had to be saved,” Tara said. “It didn't matter if you didn't feel moved to do that—you did it to survive.”

The worst form of punishment, the lockup, was reserved for girls who had not yet been saved—who had talked of running away or who had proven to be particularly intractable. The lockup was a dorm room devoid of furniture or natural light where girls spent days, or weeks, alone. Taped Roloff sermons were piped into the room, and the near-constant sound of his voice was the girls' only companionship. Former Rebekah resident Tamra Sipes, now 34 and working in advertising for a newspaper in Oak Harbor, Washington, remembers one girl who was relegated to the lockup for an entire month. “The smell had become so bad from her not being able to shower or bathe that it reeked in the hallway,” she said. “We could do nothing to help her. I remember standing in roll call one day waiting for my name to be called off, and I was directly across from the door. She was singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to herself in such a pitiful voice that I couldn't help but cry for her.”

Lester Roloff never attempted to hide that he used Bible discipline and all that it entailed; “We whip 'em with love and we weep with 'em and they love us for it,” he once said. But he also knew what the State of Texas would have to say about his methods, so when he reopened his homes in the fall of 1979 under the auspices of the People's Baptist

Church, he again refused to apply for a state license. “I’ll never sacrifice my girls on the altar of an unrighteous decree,” Roloff vowed. Attorney General Mark White responded by filing suit and prosecuting the preacher anew, contending that his youth homes were still subject to state licensure. Roloff enjoyed an early victory in 1981, when a district court judge ruled in his favor, but the decision was overturned on appeal. In 1984 the Supreme Court of Texas sided with the state, holding that the licensing of church-run child-care facilities violated no First Amendment religious freedoms. The following year, the United States Supreme Court let that decision stand. The Rebekah Home would have to be licensed or shut down.

Roloff would not live long enough to see the end of his battle with the state. On November 2, 1982, his single-engine Cessna crashed near the town of Normangee, killing him and the four young women on board who made up the Honeybee Quartet. As an “airborne messenger of the gospel,” Roloff had always thrived on riding out the rough weather—flying headlong into hail storms and foggy nights and the fiercest of squalls—always crediting “the touch of an unseen hand” in bringing him back to earth. Once, after he had been forced to land on a freeway outside Chattanooga with a dead engine, he took advantage of the crowd that gathered by taking out his Bible and testifying to God’s faithfulness. But on that November day, a norther blew in whose winds proved to be too strong, plunging the preacher’s plane to the ground and scattering the debris for miles. His death would leave a profound vacuum within the People’s Baptist Church, for his magnetism and political influence were suddenly gone. In his stead, his right-hand man, Wiley Cameron, a soft-spoken preacher who had worked for Roloff since 1973, would take his place. Cameron eulogized Roloff as having bravely spent the last eight years of his life fighting “the forces of hell” and vowed to continue the late minister’s battle with the State of Texas.

On New Year’s Eve, 1985, time ran out. A court order stated that Cameron had to obtain a state license for the youth homes or shut them down by January 1. He elected to do neither. Instead, he and several church employees spirited away the one hundred or so teenagers left in the homes, loading them onto a convoy of buses and beginning the long drive north to Missouri, where a state license would not be required. Back at the compound, the Texas flag was lowered to half-staff. A church spokesperson stood on the steps of the empty Rebekah Home and told reporters, “The Roloff Homes are in exile.” They would not return for fourteen years.



Still open at the Roloff Compound are three homes for adults. These women are residents of The Jubilee Home.

DEANNE DAWSEY'S MOTHER, DEBBIE, had learned of the Rebekah Home after doing an Internet search for Christian girls' schools. She knew nothing of the home's history, and though she had heard Lester Roloff's name before, she knew only that he had been a famous preacher. Before enrolling her daughter there, Debbie had toured the home and met with Wiley Cameron and his wife, Fay. She was impressed with what she saw. "I felt like I was leaving my child with kind grandparents," she said. "They said, 'We will take care of her as if she's our very own.'" The Rebekah Home seemed to be exactly what she had been seeking: a strict religious school that would provide DeAnne with an education as well as moral and spiritual instruction. Gone was much of the fencing that had encircled the home during its previous incarnation, which might have raised her suspicions. So were some of the crueler punishments. Kneeling was no longer used, and paddling was employed only sparingly—most likely because of the circumstances under which the Rebekah Home and the Anchor Home for Boys had closed in Missouri: The *Kansas City Times* had run an investigative article in 1987 on physical abuse at the

homes. Two days after the article ran, Cameron shut them down and returned to Texas. None of this was known to DeAnne's mother. "I had no idea that this place was a wolf in sheep's clothing," she said.

WILEY CAMERON KEPT HOPE ALIVE that he might someday reopen the Rebekah Home in Texas. He had been a loyal soldier in the Christian Alamo—Rolloff referred to the two of them as "Travis and Bowie"—and he saw it as his sacred duty to continue Rolloff's fight long after his mentor was dead and gone. "We believe that we have a mandate from God Himself," Cameron said in an interview this fall. "To take a license is to admit that there's someone above God." Having lost his case in the courtroom, however, he knew the only way to prevail was to spur the Legislature to change Texas law. After years of failure, he saw his chance in 1995, when George W. Bush became governor. "For eighteen years we tried to get bills passed that would allow us to operate without a license," Cameron said. "We worked and labored without any results, and then finally Mr. Bush came to help. When he appointed the faith-based task force, we saw an opportunity."

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In 1995 Bush convened a fifteen-member advisory task force made up largely of clergy and charged them with two objectives: to identify state laws and regulations that hindered the work of faith-based groups and to recommend ways to lift some of those regulations. The task force was formed after Bush took an interest in an ongoing battle between the Texas Commission of Alcohol and Drug Abuse and a faith-based drug-treatment center, Teen Challenge, in San Antonio. The agency had threatened to shut down the rehab center after citing it for a list of violations, chiefly its failure to hire licensed drug counselors. Teen Challenge instead employed counselors who used prayer and Bible study—not medical and psychological training—as their guide. Bush stepped into the fray and defended Teen Challenge, whose philosophy resonated with his own experience: He had shaken a drinking problem in 1986 after experiencing a profound spiritual awakening and knew the role that faith could play in recovery. Bush was also an admirer of Marvin Olasky, a University of Texas journalism professor whose influential 1992 book, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, argued that the war on poverty was a failure and that government should turn to faith-based groups to solve the nation's social problems.

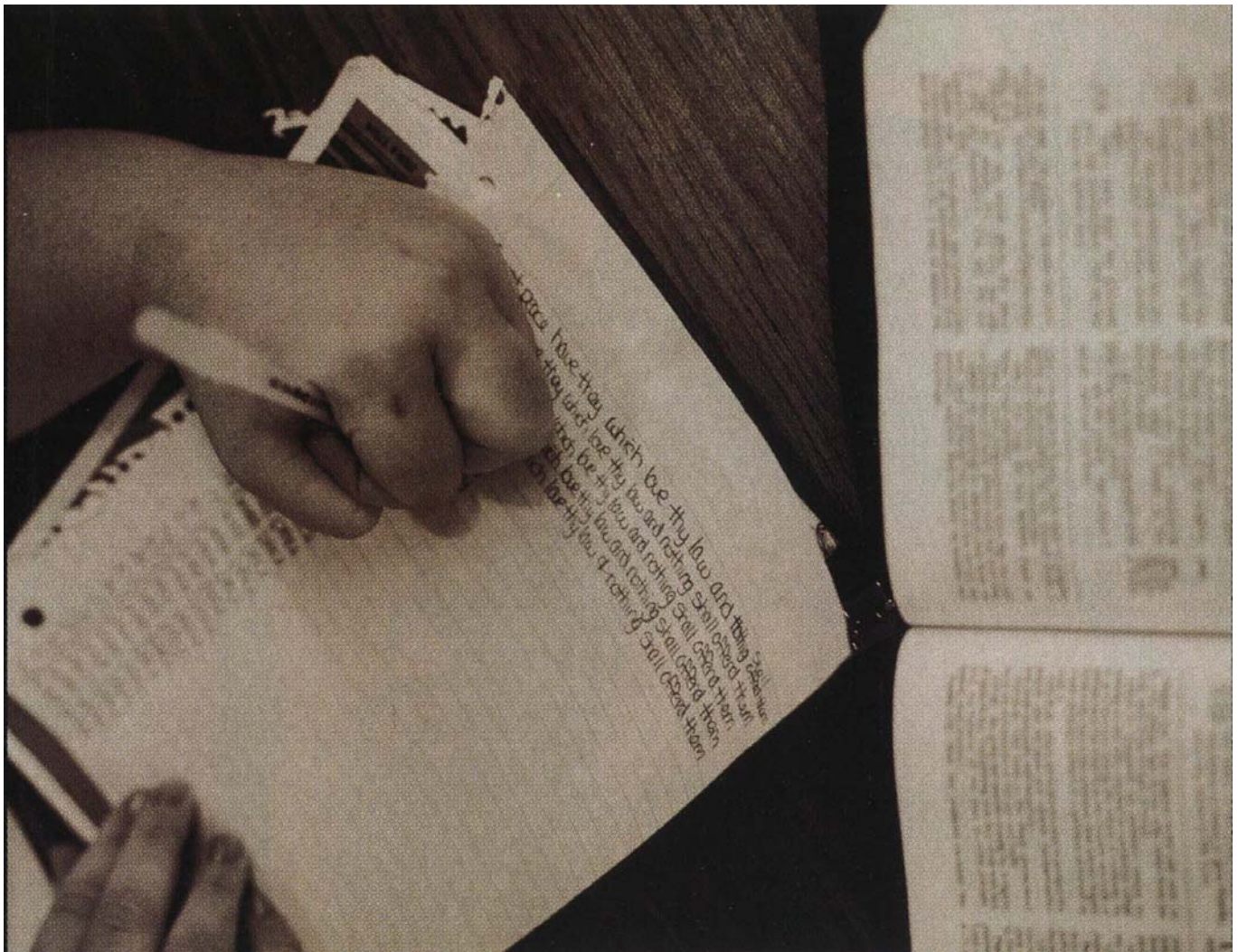
Spurned by the state for more than twenty years, Lester Roloff's ministry at last found a receptive audience in the task force, to which Cameron spoke in 1996. It was a remarkable reversal of fortune, one Roloff surely would have relished. Don Willett, who was overseeing the task force for the governor, had Cameron speak to its members about his theological opposition to state oversight. (Willett would go on to draft the legislation that stemmed from the task force's work.) Cameron was accompanied by several residents from his adult homes, the Lighthouse and the Jubilee Home for Ladies, who spoke about the ways in which the ministry had transformed their lives. When the task force issued its report, "Faith in Action," later that year, it recommended that faith-based child-care facilities be allowed to exempt themselves from state licensure and instead submit to "alternative accreditation"—that is, oversight by a non-governmental body, such as a group of pastors.

Governor Bush, in his 1997 state-of-the-state speech, urged lawmakers to act upon the report. He put forth a faith-based legislative agenda that included a bill—sponsored by Representative John Smithee, of Amarillo, and Senator David Sibley, of Waco, both Republicans—that allowed faith-based child-care facilities to opt out of state licensure. The bill carried no endorsements from any organized religious groups, since all well-known denominations—whether they were Baptist or Jewish, Catholic or Lutheran—had long welcomed state oversight of their child-care facilities. Instead, the primary witness to speak in favor of the bill before the House Human Services Committee was the Roloff Homes' own attorney, David Gibbs III, of Seminole, Florida. But Gibbs never identified his client to lawmakers during 45 minutes of testimony. He stated only that he represented hundreds of churches across Texas. Even when Representative Jim McReynolds, of Lufkin, asked what would keep the bill from being exploited by fringe groups like "the Branch Davidians and the Lester Roloffs," Gibbs—whose firm had represented Roloff and his ministry for 25 years—stayed mum about his firm's association with the preacher. ("I was never specifically asked if I represented the Roloff Homes," said Gibbs in an interview this fall.) One would think the omission was not lost on Don Willett, who had been friends with Gibbs from their days together at Duke University School of Law. There was little debate in committee, and while Cameron registered himself as favoring the bill, he did not testify or say where he pastored. With the backing of the governor, the bill advanced to the House floor and passed easily.

The only legislator to voice deep reservations about the bill was Senator Carlos Truan, of Corpus Christi. In the seventies Truan had chaired the committee that had held hearings on abuse at the Rebekah Home and had supported the Child Care Licensing Act in 1975. "There was no need to undo a law that we had worked so hard to pass," said Truan this fall. "It was passed for a good reason—to protect children from abuse. The idea that

suddenly someone could hold up the Bible and exempt himself from the law was outrageous.” Truan made his case on the Senate floor, arguing that mainstream religious groups had always welcomed state oversight and that the bill might allow people like Lester Roloff to set up shop again. “Sibley said this was something Governor Bush wanted, and that was the only anointment it needed—there was no debate,” said Truan. Moments before the bill was voted on, however, Sibley agreed to a sunset amendment by Senator Rodney Ellis, of Houston: The law would expire in four years unless the Legislature elected to renew it. The bill passed, and Bush signed it into law.

The new law called for private accreditation agencies, rather than the state, to oversee faith-based homes—but the only one to register with the state was the Texas Association of Christian Child-Care Agencies (TACCCA), whose six-person board of directors included none other than Wiley Cameron. The agency did not exist until just after the passage of the bill; it was headed by Pastor David Blaser, a longtime admirer of Lester Roloff’s. When the agency applied for state approval, state accreditation officials hesitated, citing the new law’s requirement that only “recognized” accrediting agencies be approved. Don Willett, with the governor’s office, said that the law was not intended to rule out new agencies, and the state relented after determining that all six board members had experience running child-care facilities. On December 23, 1998, David Blaser wrote the TACCCA’s members: “Praise the Lord! We just had a phone call from Austin and the lady in charge of our application said that our application to be an accrediting agency for children’s homes and day-care facilities in Texas is approved. God has given us a wonderful Christmas gift. What a blessing it is to know that very soon the Roloff Homes will once again ‘help the helpless,’ ‘encourage the discouraged,’ ‘give faith to the faithless,’ ‘guide the lost,’ ‘trade hope for dope,’ and ‘preach Christ as the answer for our troubled youth.’ . . . Our God hears and answers our prayers.”



Punishment for wrongdoing includes copying verses from the Bible.

DEANNE DAWSEY REFUSED TO MEET HER MOTHER'S GLANCE as she was escorted inside the Rebekah Home by two guards who walked on either side of her to prevent her from running. Once inside, she was plunged into a monastic existence that left her cut off from the outside world. "It didn't take long to figure out that this was not an ordinary boarding school," said DeAnne. She was ordered to strip down and told to put on the home's required clothing: a long skirt that covered her legs—no pants were allowed—and a loose-fitting shirt. Then she was taken to the living quarters, where she met many of the 25 or so residents. Some of the girls had been sent there for being in gangs or on drugs, and as they greeted her, they gave her the rundown of how things worked at the Rebekah Home: there were no televisions, no radios, no magazines. Speaking of anything worldly was forbidden, as was singing worldly songs. Meeting eyes with boys in church was barred. Letters going both in and out of the home were read first by the staff and censored. Phone calls, which could be placed only to family members, were monitored. No conversations were private, since staff listened in on the intercoms

that were installed in each bedroom. “Just give in and do whatever they want,” her roommate told her.

DeAnne looked out the dormitory windows, which were still wired with alarms to prevent escape, and tried to picture spending the next year of her life at the Rebekah Home. Her mind reeled. “I cried all night long,” she said. “I don’t think I fell asleep until about an hour before I had to wake up. I was freaked out.” Her anxiety only grew in the days to come. Each morning, she and the other girls were required to listen to a taped Lester Roloff sermon while they did their chores. Each afternoon, they were required to attend a Bible memorization session, where they had to read Bible verses out loud, in unison, in what sounded like a chant. What troubled her was not the sentiment behind these exercises, for she considered herself to be deeply faithful: Raised in an Assembly of God church, she had stepped forward at a revival when she was twelve years old to be baptized and to accept Jesus Christ as her personal savior. What disturbed her was her growing suspicion that this was “a cult,” whose methods had left some of the girls in her midst brainwashed. “Everyone talked about Roloff like he was God,” she said. “The majority of every sermon was talking about how Roloff did this and Roloff did that, instead of testifying to how *God* did this and *God* did that. It was just totally mixed up. People were really worshiping him instead of God.”

DeAnne hated many things about life at the Rebekah Home—the isolation, the constant surveillance, the joyless view of faith. She took pity on a dim-witted girl whom, she says, Fay Cameron slapped for not doing her homework; DeAnne would have her own run-in with Mrs. Cameron as well. DeAnne had written a letter to her boyfriend, whom she had not been able to communicate with since leaving Houston. As was the custom, Mrs. Cameron read the letter to see if it needed any alterations before being mailed. She soon handed it back to DeAnne and told her that she would have to rewrite it entirely because it painted too negative a portrait of the Rebekah Home. When DeAnne refused, Mrs. Cameron told her the letter would not be sent. “I lost my temper, and I called her a nasty word—I called her a bitch,” DeAnne said. “I was furious because everything in that letter was true, but I wasn’t allowed to write it.” In return, she says, Mrs. Cameron delivered a stinging slap to DeAnne’s face.

The two would have another confrontation several weeks later: DeAnne had been caught talking in class, and when she was told to write “I will not talk in class” one hundred times, she refused. (“I was tired of playing by their rules,” she said.) Mrs. Cameron grabbed her by the arm and marched her to the lockup. “You’ll stay here until you write your sentences,” she said, bolting the door behind her.

Inside the lockup, Lester Roloff's voice began to play over the intercom, his rich baritone echoing off the walls—sermonizing, singing gospel songs, and exhorting all who listened to come to Jesus. His voice droned on as morning turned into afternoon and afternoon into evening. DeAnne stuck her fingers in her ears, but his voice seemed to have lodged in her brain. She began yelling rap songs at the top of her lungs—anything to drown out the sound—but Roloff's voice was only turned up louder. "You people are crazy!" she screamed at one point, beating her fists against the wall. "Get me the hell out of here!" She began kicking the wall that night, and by morning a hole had formed in the Sheetrock. ("I felt like I was losing my mind," she said.) Mrs. Cameron warned her that if she did not stop, she would be restrained. When DeAnne persisted, she was wrestled to the ground by three male guards, who pinned her arms behind her back while Mrs. Cameron bound her wrists with duct tape. Her ankles were then bound as well, and once she was immobilized, someone—DeAnne is unsure who—gave her a hard kick to the ribs. She was left alone to writhe on the floor, gasping for air. Having worked herself into a sweat trying to fight off the guards, she was able to squirm out of the tape within a few minutes. She has no idea how long she would have been left restrained.

After 32 hours in the lockup, DeAnne finally relented and wrote her sentences. The following day, when she complained that her ribs were hurting, Wiley Cameron called her mother to say that he was sending DeAnne home. "The only reason they put me on that plane is because they knew that if they called a doctor, they were going to have to answer a lot of questions," DeAnne said. She had lasted only three weeks at the Rebekah Home. As soon as she returned to Houston, she called Child Protective Services, which launched an investigation into the Rebekah Home. Since Texas law forbids child-care facilities to seclude their residents in locked rooms or bind them with restraints like duct tape, the agency issued the home one finding each of physical abuse, medical neglect, and neglectful supervision—and ultimately banned Fay Cameron from working with children in the state of Texas ever again. The home was not given so much as a warning by the TACCCA, even though it had violated state law; in fact, it was reaccredited the following year.

Abuse allegations surfaced last year from several young men who were housed at the Lighthouse, another home on the Roloff compound. That incident has resulted in a misdemeanor conviction of the home's superintendent on charges of unlawful restraint and a civil suit against the People's Baptist Church, the TACCCA, and several individuals, including the Camerons. DeAnne Dawsey has joined the suit as a plaintiff, alleging physical and emotional abuse. The case is expected to go to trial in the spring and seeks unspecified damages. "The Rebekah Home should never be open for business again," said DeAnne's mother, Debbie. "I hope the lawsuit can finally lay that to rest."

Now nineteen, DeAnne is trying to get her life back on track. Though she never graduated from high school, she is working part-time as a model in Houston. Her former boyfriend is out of her life, and she and her mother have reconciled. “I’m still angry about what happened to me,” she said. “It’s hard for me to understand how people who speak His word could act that way.”



No more girls will occupy this bedroom in the now-closed Rebekah Home.

WILEY CAMERON CLOSED THE REBEKAH HOME this summer after the Legislature failed to renew the law that allowed it to escape state regulation. During its four-year life span, the law had little impact, except on the lives of people like DeAnne Dawsey, who had the misfortune to wind up in the Rebekah Home: The overwhelming majority of faith-based child-care facilities chose to remain under state oversight; only 7 of 2,015 religious institutions elected to operate under alternative accreditation. Still, what happened in Texas could happen in Washington if President George W. Bush has

his way. Bush has sought to duplicate the same regulatory rollbacks for faith-based groups that he enacted in Texas. During his second week as president, he established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and charged it with a familiar task: to “identify and act to remedy statutory, regulatory, and bureaucratic barriers that stand in the way of effective faith-based and community social programs,” almost the same language that was used in Texas. He also named Don Willett—who drafted the bill that allowed the Roloff Homes’ return to Texas—to serve as the director of law and policy for the White House office.

The administration’s faith-based proposals had already encountered opposition when the events of September 11 put non-essential legislation on hold. However, the White House has said it can put its plans into effect by executive action. The easing of regulation would apply only to faith-based groups that receive federal grants, such as runaway shelters and drug or alcohol rehabilitation centers; private child-care facilities like the Rebekah Home would not be covered. Faith-based organizations, freed from regulation under the proposed Bush plan, could impose the same sort of harsh discipline that was practiced at the Rebekah Home. For that matter, the Texas Legislature could resurrect the law that cleared the way for the Rebekah Home to reopen without state regulation. Samantha Smoot, the executive director of the Texas Freedom Network, which opposed the 1997 bill, warns, “In Texas we saw that the loosening of regulations was an open invitation to fringe groups to operate.”

Back on the Roloff compound, south of Corpus Christi, Wiley Cameron still keeps hope alive. On a cool, clear morning this fall he walked the grounds and spoke about his “burden to help the down and out.” The 72-year-old preacher—dressed in a crisp white guayabera and khakis—whistled gospel tunes and waved at his brethren, speaking with the certainty of a man who knew he was following his calling. “Morning!” he called out to residents of the adult homes, wearing a broad smile. “Good morning, Brother Cameron!” they would reply or simply “Praise Jesus!” Women on the porch of the Jubilee Home nodded and swept, and young men from the Lighthouse tilled soil off in the distance, tending to their winter gardens. “We feel it’s a Bible mandate, like the Samaritan, to help people in the ditch,” he explained. “If we have to get down in the ditch to help people, sometimes we get a little dirty doing it.” Put another way, he said, “We get troubled kids and we use unconventional methods.” Did that mean that abusive disciplinary methods were used? “We have never abused one person—all of these years, there has never been one case of child abuse that’s been proved in court,” he said. “There have been allegations, but some people construe abuse where there was not abuse.” As for DeAnne’s case, he would not talk about specifics, given pending litigation, except to say, “DeAnne was a very troubled girl.”

The Rebekah Home for girls lay ahead of him, an empty white dormitory shuttered against sunlight. Inside, the beds were still tidily made in girlish pinks, as if their keepers had stepped out for a moment and never returned. The house seemed almost ghostly, filled with the residual memories of too many forgotten girls. Lester Roloff used to walk these deserted halls in the wake of the Christian Alamo, when his girls were briefly sent away: Overcome by the stillness, he would often fall to his knees and cry.

The compound is quieter now, having faded into the rural landscape, but it is still haunted by Roloff's memory. Behind the Rebekah Home stands his old stone house, where his living room serves as an informal shrine. The walls are adorned with heroic portraits of Roloff brandishing his Bible, and scattered about the room are an odd assortment of personal effects: his felt hat, his John Deere bicycle, his radio microphone. The bullet-torn American flag from Vietnam that graced his casket is on display, as is the Purple Heart an admirer gave him for his valor. Beside the door hangs a lacquered sign that reads "Men must be governed by God or they will be ruled by tyrants." Now Cameron followed in Roloff's footsteps, walking down the long, dark corridors of the Rebekah Home, passing empty bedroom after empty bedroom. "We have a million-dollar facility that's empty, and there's no rhyme or reason to it," he said. "I have to say, 'Lord, I don't understand, but I know You have a plan.'"

Then he suddenly leaned against the wall, as if his will to continue on this sad march had left him. He began to weep softly. "If they could just understand the good we do here," he said. "There are so many more girls left to help."

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A 32-year-old former teacher at Dickinson High School in Galveston has [surrendered to police](#). He is accused of having an improper relationship with a 17-year-old student. Last year, Texas saw 150 similar reported incidents. No other state comes close to the number of cases reported in Texas. Number 2 on the list is Pennsylvania, with 45 cases this year.

Doug Phillips, director of educator investigations with the [Texas Education Agency](#) (TEA), says his agency investigated 222 cases of [inappropriate relationships](#) between teachers and students last year. He expects at least that many cases this year. He says these numbers reflect an increase of 35 to 40 cases over the previous year.

Phillips says he believes the greater number of cases is the result of teachers and students having more opportunities to communicate than they ever have.

Phillips says districts should consider setting parameters for social media interaction between students and teachers.

"I think you can't eliminate social media and electronic media when you're dealing with students because it's too much of a teaching tool," he says. "But you can put parameters on how it's used.

A proposed law would offer guidance to districts – if no firm rules.

"I don't know if you've taken a look at [Senate Bill 7](#) that's currently making its way through the process. It does address social media. It's just more suggestive language, but it does require the district to establish a policy regarding social media."

Phillips acknowledges that investigators are reacting, rather than preventing teacher-student relationships, but says TEA is working to educate school districts on how to spot problems.

"One of the proactive things we've done is training," he says. "A lot of our training is built around [knowing what] things to look for so that we can prevent these relationships from developing. Of course, our main focus is protecting kids, but we also want to protect these educators."

Phillips says educators are usually responsible for actions that lead to inappropriate relationships with their students.

"I wouldn't call them a victim," he says. "Their lives certainly can be completely ruined, but in the vast majority of these cases, these are things they've initiated, and that they have an opportunity to get out of.

Written by Shelly Brisbin.

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