

SUSPENSION

ERIE COUNTY LEGISLATURE

PATRICK B. BURKE

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The Honorable Kevin Hardwick
Chairman of the Government Affairs Committee
92 Franklin Street
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March 20, 2017

Dear Legislator Hardwick,

I am requesting an opportunity to have speakers at the Government Affairs Committee on March 30, 2017 regarding my bill LL Intro 5-1 (2017) banning conversion therapy in Erie County. After speaking with people of every political persuasion, it is clear to me that this practice is universally condemned and is only supported by a handful of extremists.

A recent ABC News investigation has revealed that there are conversion therapy camps sprouting up throughout the country. The report says "for every conversion therapy camp that we know of, there are one hundred that we don't know about." There are also conversion therapy programs that travel and set up temporary "groups" or "camps".

Unfortunately, the abusive practice of conversion therapy is alive and well. We must be proactive in not only condemning it but also making it illegal. It is difficult to comprehend that abusing and brainwashing children is currently legal in Erie County, NY. The Erie County Legislature has time and again proven its commitment to child welfare and this should be no different.

As you know, this bill has received national media attention, largely due to its title: The Prevention of Emotional Neglect and Child Endangerment otherwise known as the PENCE Bill. Recently and for the first time, the Vice President has denounced the awful practice of conversion therapy. I now think it is appropriate to remove his name from the county bill and move forward with the merits of this legislation.

I am, as always, open to recommendations that will improve this legislation and welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you at the next Government Affairs Committee.

Sincerely,

Patrick B. Burke
Erie County Legislator

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrick B. Burke", is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Newsweek, ABC '20/20' Reports Expose Abuse, Torture Of Gay Youths And Troubled Teens

“Once again, Alabama law enforcement has failed to protect children.”

Art Levine, Contributor

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Shocking recent reports in Newsweek and on ABC News “20/20” expose brutal torture and abuse by now-convicted felons and at least one accused pastor targeting troubled teens — and gay youths singled out for “gay conversion” therapy.

As illustrated in a police complaint filed by now 17-year-old Lucas Greenfield, who escaped from a Christian boot camp, Pastor Gary Wiggins allegedly declared, “I’m going to get the demon out of you and make you straight.”

As I first reported last week in Newsweek, in an adaptation from my forthcoming book, *Mental Health, Inc.: How Corruption, Lax Oversight, and Failed Reforms Endanger Our Most Vulnerable Citizens*, Captain Charles Kennedy of the Prichard, Alabama police department fought a nearly five-year battle to close down and arrest the overseers of a program originally known as Restoration Youth Academy (RYA).

Newsweek, following the pioneering reporting of *The Mobile Press-Register*, reported:

As Kennedy investigated, he found that many of the school’s “cadets” were afraid to talk. But those who did left Kennedy with the impression that he had stumbled across something terrible. The boys, for instance, told him they were often grabbed out their beds in the middle of the night and forced to fight one another until one was beaten to a pulp. All of them were subjected to a brutal, daily regimen of exercises, sometimes stark naked—pushups, jumping jacks and running in place. Drill instructors, including Knott, frequently punched them, choked them and body-slammed them as they worked out. On his first day in the program, one boy claimed, Knott crouched down next to him, and, after yanking his head up by his hair, started pounding his skull against the floor while shouting, “You will exercise until I get tired!” Another told Kennedy he had been held upside down in shackles and hit with a belt, an allegation later supported by an eyewitness letter by another teen. (*Newsweek* either provided anonymity to the minors in the

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program or changed their names to protect their privacy, unless granted permission to quote such young victims as Lucas Greenfield.)

But he was thwarted by local and state child protective services and law enforcement agencies up through the then-Attorney General, now-U.S. Senator Luther Strange.

“These children are from out of state, and their parents don’t vote here, and I don’t want the churches mad at me,” Kennedy says Strange’s top investigator told him early in 2012 in regards to Strange’s views. (Strange disputed the the claim in a letter.)

Yet until there was a raid on the facility’s new location in nearby Mobile in 2015 and the program’s top three leaders were convicted on all counts of aggravated child abuse in January 2017, sentenced to 20 years each last month, nothing was done.

Kennedy’s feeling of triumph and vindication is tempered by the fact they got away with it for so long. “They all knew,” he says of the government agencies that ignored his pleas, “and they did nothing.”

The tribulations of Lucas Greenfield, a gay teen dumped by his mother into a series of Christian tough-love programs including RYA, demonstrate the politically-protected persistence of extremist fundamentalist practices. An adopted child who knew early on that he was gay, his Christian mother couldn’t handle him and sought to have him “converted” from his gay orientation in extremist Christian programs. He’s the focus of the “20/20” episode.

As first reported by the *Mobile Press-Register*, Greenfield, then 14, was caught trying to escape RYA and then placed in an isolation cell for close to three months, driving him close to madness. “What’s the best way to kill myself?” he wondered during the long hours alone. He was a virtual prisoner for roughly two years.

After the March 2015 raid in Mobile that freed him, along with 35 other young people, he waited in vain for his mother to pick him up from Alabama youth services. Since she never showed, he returned to his hometown of Naples, Florida as a ward of the state.

In the fall, apparently on a crusade to rid him of his homosexuality, his divorced mother and father joined together to win custody for the mother. On the same day, she jumped in the car and sped off north to drop the terrified boy at yet another harsh Christian program in Alabama, the Blessed Hope Boys Academy near the Florida line, over the objections of his juvenile court Guardian Ad-Litem, Steve Donovan.

After a call from Lucas, Kennedy drove over to meet with the pastor, Garry Wiggins, after Lucas arrived. He tried to explain Lucas’s traumatic past, but Wiggins was in no mood to listen. Lucas, upset about being packed off to one fundamentalist hell-hole after another, made clear that he didn’t want to be there and boldly told Wiggins, “I’m gay.”

After Kennedy left, Lucas told him later, Wiggins turned on the boy and essentially declared that he was going to beat the gay out of him. He then administered a harsh beating with a belt on his

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back and legs, according to Greenfield and a police report he filed a few days later with a Florida police department after he escaped from yet another boot-camp.

The beat-down was so damaging and obvious that, Kennedy and Greenfield charge, he was shipped two days later to yet another harsh boot-camp across state lines in Florida, the former Heritage Boys Academy, which was shut down in 2010 after the state found evidence of whippings—but had reopened under a new name. Lucas escaped within a day, found his way to the sheriff's office of Bay County, where the notorious facility was located, and turned himself in, reporting the abuse he experienced at the Blessed Boys Academy. Detectives there believed his story, took photos of his bruises and sent them along with a police report to the Baldwin County Sheriff's Office in Alabama in September 2015. (When this reporter called Wiggins for comment, he snapped, "It's lies, all lies," and then hung up the phone.)

The program was emptied of out-of-state students in December 2016 following allegations — vigorously denied by Wiggins and his attorney — by two escapees that kids were forced to endure brutal exercise regimens, denied food and required to stand for hours at attention with their faces nearly pressed into the wall.

Neither the DA nor the sheriff's office have vigorously pursued any criminal prosecution action since then against Wiggins or the program, despite Lucas's willingness to testify—and even come down from New York City, where he now lives under the protection of child services until he turns 18. (He would surely prove to be an effective witness: During the January 2017 trial that convicted Knott's team, he coolly confronted his abusers and destroyed the defense attorney's efforts to undermine his credibility by challenging the defense attorneys' questions with answers they didn't want to hear, such as, "You mean you want me to tell you about the time Knott threw me through the wall?" He elicited laughter from the jury, and Kennedy recalls, "He made a fool out of the lawyer.")

Yet in an exclusive interview with this reporter, the Baldwin County, AL sheriff's department spokesman, Major Anthony Lowery, downplayed the allegations. His office did a superficial "investigation" of Lucas Greenfield's complaint that Lucas was severely beaten by Wiggins who had reportedly declared, "I am going to get the demon out of you and make your straight." Lowery viewed the complaint as not that serious, at most the misdemeanor of "harassment" and he says that they couldn't "substantiate" them — although they never spoke to Lucas. He also claimed that they didn't get photos of the bruises, but a police source in Bay county sheriff's office said that photos of the bruises — somewhat older, but still visible — were sent to Baldwin County and DCF child abuse line via email.

Thus far, however, Kennedy's pleas for prosecution have been ignored. "Once again, Alabama law enforcement has failed to protect children," he says.

Kennedy is equally outraged that former state Attorney General Luther Strange has been appointed a U.S. senator to replace Jeff Sessions, the new U.S. attorney general. "He [Strange] threw the children under the bus so he could grease the way for his political ambitions," Kennedy says. "All these politicians have lined their pockets with the blood of children."

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The traumas many of these young people continue to face is why Kennedy continues to fight against abuse.

“One of my greatest satisfactions is knowing that these children who suffered so much at their hands know that justice has been served in some way,” he says, but “you can’t return the youth that was stolen from them, you can’t restore the mental and physical damage that was done.”