

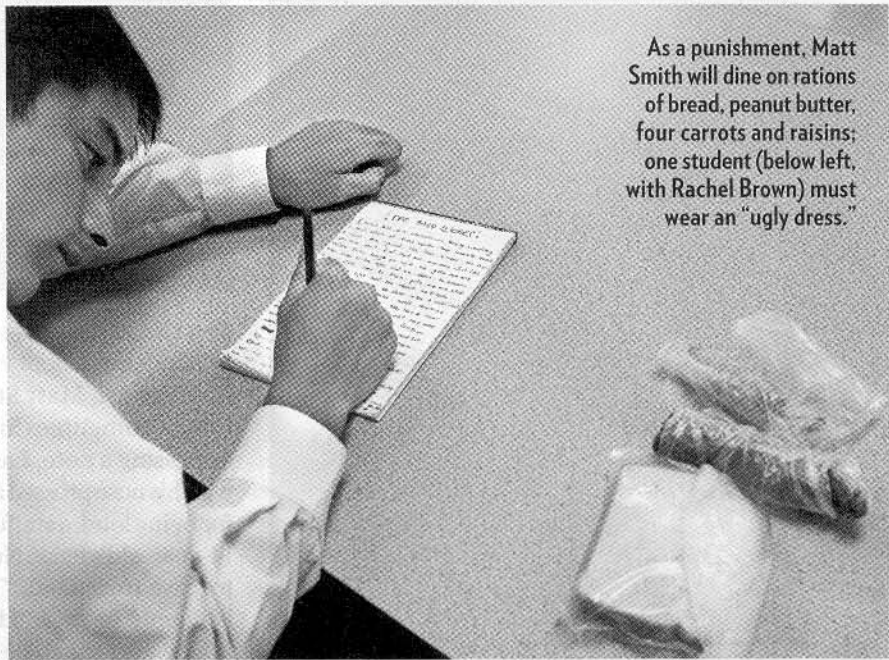
er. Sharpe, who has poured more than \$50 million of his own money into building Heartland, enforces an educational philosophy heavy on discipline for 104 troubled students, mostly from the Midwest, who range in age from 5 to 17: daily Bible study, strict rules and corporal punishment with a 2½-ft. wooden paddle. “The only thing these kids understand is pain,” says Sharpe, 79. “We’ve created a society where the kids are in charge, and it’s causing a complete breakdown.” Adds his wife, Laurie, 47, who runs the girls’ dormitory: “Swatting [padding] is biblical. You have to teach a child to live right.”

Boot camps for problem kids are nothing new in this country, but Heartland, with its emphasis on religion, is one of about a dozen last-resort schools that have flourished in Missouri, where the state’s interpretation of freedom of religion permits such faith-based facilities to go unregulated. “We don’t monitor, we don’t supervise, and their discipline policies are not regulated by state authorities,” says Jim Morris, spokesman for the Missouri Department of Education. “We tell parents to ask a lot of questions.”

Most mainstream child-development experts criticize boot camp techniques—separating kids from their families, subjecting them to humiliation—as ineffective, even harmful. “These programs create in parents a sense of crisis. If you don’t act, your child will end up in jail or dead on the streets,” says critic Dr. Robert Friedman, a clinical psychologist at the University of South Florida and an expert on teen mental health issues. According to Maia Szalavitz, author of a new book about boot camps, *Help at Any Cost*, the heavy use of punishment doesn’t necessarily build strong character. “The idea that you need to break people to fix them may produce compliance, but that’s all,” she says.

Heartland, in particular, has been accused of taking discipline too far. After multiple reports of abuse, including a student whose eardrum was punctured during an altercation with a junior staffer, a dozen deputy sheriffs and juvenile officers raided the campus

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As a punishment, Matt Smith will dine on rations of bread, peanut butter, four carrots and raisins; one student (below left, with Rachel Brown) must wear an “ugly dress.”



in 2001, removing 115 students. Although charges were eventually dropped and the majority of the students have returned—and been joined by recent arrivals—law enforcement has kept an eye on the facility. “He’s not an educator, not a child expert, not even an ordained minister,” says Lewis County prosecutor Jake DeCoster of Sharpe. Sharpe’s take is even harsher. In a 2002 sermon, he called DeCoster

“a pawn of Satan.” (As for Matt Smith’s broken arm, the sheriff determined it was not an assault.)

Sharpe’s students pay no fees in return for a commitment to stay until graduation, but if they leave early they are billed for back tuition of \$600 a month. “I wanted my kids to get through these years without a criminal record and without getting pregnant,” says Sheri Farley, 48, who sent three of her six