

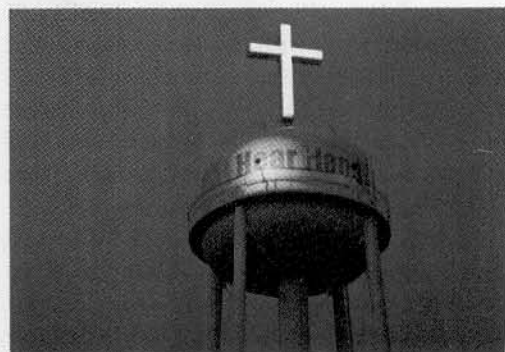
Jurors decided the manure case did not meet the definition of child abuse in Missouri. And Sharpe makes no apologies. “The kids said, ‘We don’t want to go to school.’ Okay, we’ll show you what life is like without schooling,” he says. “The next day, they decided school wasn’t so bad.” Although no charges are currently pending against Heartland, a registered sex offender—one of seven who work at the facility—pleaded guilty four months ago to charges of making lewd comments to a 14-year-old girl. Sharpe responds that he does not turn his back on anyone: “Our job is to take care of people that are messed up.”

Heartland’s legal problems may not be over yet. Mark Stajduhar, now 20 and married, told PEOPLE that four months after arriving at Heartland in 1999, he was sexually assaulted in the dormitory by a male student supervisor. The abuse, he says, continued for months. “He was bigger than me,” says Stajduhar, now a freshman at Culver-Stockton College in Canton, Mo. “If I told someone, I knew I’d get accused of being a homosexual.” Stajduhar filed a report with the local sheriff’s department in 2003, and a criminal investigation, the sheriff says, is

“HOW THEY DEAL WITH A CHILD IS PROBABLY NOT A LOT DIFFERENT THAN IN A PRISON. I DON’T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THAT” PARENT CHRISTINE PUGH

ongoing. Stajduhar has also hired a lawyer and filed a class action suit against Heartland that was served last November. “I’m not saying it’s impossible but I don’t know about it,” says Rob Patchin, Sharpe’s grandson and the boy’s dorm supervisor, of Stajduhar’s claims. “And I’m sticking to that.”

Whatever happened in the past doesn’t matter to Christine Pugh, 38, who sent her daughter Danielle Walker, 16, and her son Brent Moore, 15, to Heartland when they began sneaking out of the house at night and hanging out with a rough crowd. “How they deal with an unruly child is probably not a lot different than in a prison. I don’t have a problem with that,” she says. Danielle returned home after two years and is making minimum wage at McDonald’s, studying for her GED. “Before, she was very argumentative. Now you just go, ‘No, it’s not open to



At Heartland, students like Dennis Powell (above) live two to a room in sex-segregated dorms. Says former pupil Mark Stajduhar: “I wrote, ‘Help’ every night on the window. I’d fog it up with my breath.”

discussion,’ and she accepts it. And she dresses more modestly,” says Pugh. Adds her stepfather, Mike: “We think she grew from it.” And Danielle? “Parents should spend a day there,” she says, “to see what really happens.” ●