

PROGRAMS: E3

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Chestnut Hill Local

Mt. Airy man overcoming abuse suffered in detention

by Sue Ann Rybak



Lillian Penn, program assistant manager at JEVS Human Services E3 Power Center City, started a walking club. Craig Stone, of Mt. Airy (seen here with Penn), who was badly beaten at Glen Mills Schools, walks with her around the Philadelphia Art Museum area twice a week.

Mt. Airy resident Craig Stone, now 24, was just 14 years old when he was sent to Glen Mills Schools (GMS), a juvenile detention center in Delaware County, for nine months. GMS, which was originally

called the Philadelphia House of Refuge, was lauded for its peer pressure model, which encouraged students to report their peers for any infraction of the rules.

However, GMS was a far cry from a house of refuge. The state closed the school in the Spring, 2019, following allegations of decades of child abuse. According to an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer in April 2019, GMS counselors “were cited for shoving a child’s head into a cabinet, striking others in the face in front of their peers, breaking open a child’s head, sending a student’s elbow through a glass window, choking a student, pushing a boy through a chair and punching a child in the ribs, among other incidents.”

The article went on to say that one boy was removed from the school “after counselors stepped on the boy’s face and broke his jaw so severely that it had to be wired shut.” Stone said staff at the school “tried to break my spirit” by abusing him physically, emotionally and mentally. He recalled counselors punching him and choking him so he couldn’t breathe.

Stone said he eventually started fighting back, which only resulted in more staff “beating me down.” He recalled one incident where counselors held him down with their hands and knees so he couldn’t move or turn his face. Then, Stone said they stomped on him and beat him beyond recognition.

“I was screaming to get help from other kids,” Stone said. “I was terrified they were going to take me someplace else.” Eventually, he was knocked unconscious. Afterwards, staff confined him to his room for three days, allegedly to give his bruises and other injuries time to heal before they took him to receive medical treatment.

He said staff members tried to bribe him by offering him special status or privileges so he would keep his mouth shut. “My parents didn’t know what was happening,” he said.

His mother knew something was wrong when she didn’t hear from him for a while, so she began calling GMS. Eventually, the Department of Human Services (DHS) got involved, and GMS gave him “a failure to adjust.” Shortly after that, he was taken to Montgomery Detention Center for roughly six months. Later, he was transferred to a rural community even farther away from Philadelphia.

The experience at GMS left Stone with post-traumatic stress disorder and full of anger and distrust. However, thanks to people like Lillian Penn, 34, program assistant manager at JEVS Human Services E3 Power Center City (formerly Jewish Employment and Vocational Service), he is optimistic about his future. E3 Center City provides education, employment and life skills training to out-of-school youth for success in the global economy.

The program was offered on-site until the pandemic occurred earlier this year, and then the program went online. Through trauma-informed lessons, Penn is changing lives by addressing the complex needs of the whole person.

Stone said he has trouble feeling safe because of the trauma he was subjected to daily at GMS. He purchased a gun for his safety. That decision eventually led to another arrest and 3.5 years of house arrest. “I made a poor decision because of my past,” he said.

Despite being under house arrest, Penn arranged for Stone to participate in the E3 program. Currently, he is working on completing his high school diploma through Penn Foster, an online education program. “I’m just blessed for real to come across a person like Lillian,” he said. “I have a lot of distrust in people. I don’t open up much.”

“He went through a lot of therapy,” said Penn. “He had to be comfortable being angry. We associate anger with a negative connotation a lot of times. After talking to him and hearing his story, I explained to him that he had a reason to be angry. It’s OK to be angry, but he had to learn how to take that anger and shift it into something healthy.”

“I do have a lot of distrust towards people,” Stone said. “I feel like she (Penn) is the reason I am seeking counseling because I don’t talk about these things with people. I try to forget about my past. At the same time, it makes me angry, and I want to stop feeling angry. My anger can get me in trouble and hurt people I don’t want to hurt.”

Penn even contacted Stone’s parole officer about allowing him to participate in a walking club. Recently, Stone and Penn walked four miles. Stone recalled walking down the parkway with her and seeing a lot of homeless people. “It was very humbling to me,” he said. “I saw a lot of people out there who are in need.”

Stone will be off house arrest next summer but is hoping to earn his diploma in just three months. “I want my life to change for the better,” he said. “I want to be able to get a job and get my own place. I want my life to move in a positive direction.”

For more information about E3, visit jevshumanservices.org/program/e3-power-center-city