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Midwest academy iowa

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KEOKUK (WGEM) - The new owners of the former Midwest Academy property in Keokuk held a groundbreaking ceremony on Wednesday on what will eventually become an event center.Midwest Academy closed in January of 2016 following a federal raid to investigate abuse allegations.In May 2018, the academy's owner, Benjamin Trane, was sentenced to nine years in prison after a Lee County jury convicted him of assault with intent to commit sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of a child by a counselor, and child endangerment.The 100 students were sent home or to other schools after the raid and the former director is now serving prison time.The campus has sat empty since the raid.Now, the long-shuttered property is getting new life.Wes Ames, owner of Ames Business Group, was part of the original construction team when the former Midwest Academy was originally built in the early 2000s. "With the past history, we weren't involved in that. I bought this based on, I know how the buildings are and how well they're built with the crews that we had and I know how long they're going to last," Wes said.Since its closing in 2016, due to abuse allegations, the building has sat boarded up and vacant.Wes Ames said he's eager to renovate the property and invite the public to experience it in a new way."Keokuk needs a place to to go have fun, good family fun and you know this is going to be a place for that," Wes Ames said. "We're going to have community events we're going to have little kids to old kids to old people like me, so we're going to make it to where it's an event for the community as well. "The project is a family affair.Wes' son, Brandt Ames, created the digital images of what the finished product should look like, and Brandt Ames said working alongside his family has been beneficial."We all give different view points and sometimes I feel like that makes for better business decisions where we all might argue or have this view point or that view point but at the end of the day we've seen it from all potential perspectives," Brandt Ames said.The property will be the future home of a wedding and event venue, called the Hidden Tower Event Center, sports complex called The Lab, and luxury apartment rentals."Our apartments should be up for rent, we're hoping in the next hopefully next month, month and a half or two," Wes Ames said.The new event center and sports complex will be in the area of former Midwest Academy where the gym was.Wes said the school building will be torn down mid-February.He plans for construction to be wrapped by July 2023.Copyright 2022, WGEM. All rights reserved. by KHQA StaffMon, March 6th 2023 at 4:52 PMUpdated Tue, March 7th 2023 at 10:28 AMBen Trane, the former owner of Midwest Academy, turned himself in on Monday, March, 6, 2023, to begin serving his prison sentence. (Lee County Sheriff's Office) KHQA.pngLEE COUNTY, Iowa (KHQA) — A little more than five years after he was found guilty of sex-related crimes, the founder of a boarding school for troubled youth in Keokuk has turned himself in to begin serving his prison sentence.Ben Trane on Monday turned himself in to Lee County authorities to begin his nine year prison sentence, according to Lee County Sheriff Stacy Weber.Trane, the former owner of Midwest Academy, was convicted by a Lee County jury in December 2017 for assault with intent to commit sexual abuse, sexual exploitation by a counselor, and child endangerment.Trane was free on appeal; however, his appeal went all the way to the Iowa Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court's convictions.RELATED:Former Midwest Academy owner found guiltyRELATED:Iowa school owner accused of asking female students to undress for 'Body Image Therapy'The convictions stemmed from allegations that Trane sexually assaulted the 17-year-old female student and kept two male students in confinement for extended periods of time.Authorities shut down the school in 2016. Child abuse: What signs to watch for if you suspect itChild abuse includes physical, sexual, emotional and medical abuse, as well as neglect. Learn about signs, risk factors, how to get help.A former boarding school director has lost his second appeal before the Iowa Supreme Court seeking to overturn his conviction for mistreating and sexually abusing students.Benjamin Trane, owner of the Midwest Academy in Keokuk, was convicted in 2017 of assaulting and sexually exploiting a female student and was sentenced to nine years in prison. The school served about 100 students, many with histories of behavioral or substance-abuse issues, until it was shut down in 2016 after officials investigating widespread abuse allegations raided the property.Trane appealed his conviction, arguing that the court failed to consider evidence that the minor victim had made other false claims of sexual abuse. In 2019, the Supreme Court ruled that Trane was entitled to a hearing to determine whether the juvenile girl had indeed made other false claims, and that if so, he was entitled to a new trial.As detailed in a new Supreme Court decision, issued Friday, the district judge did so. The court heard testimony from the girl, who alleged that she had been physically and sexually abused by her adoptive and foster parents, and from the parents, who denied her claims. The judge ruled Trane had failed to prove that "by a preponderance of the evidence, (the victim) made false allegations of sexual abuse against her adoptive parents or the foster parents" and denied his request for a new trial.Previously:Midwest Academy highlights child welfare worriesIn considering his second appeal, the Supreme Court unanimously affirmed the decision of the district judge."(The girl's) testimony constitutes substantial evidence that her allegations of sexual abuse were not false. The district court was entitled to believe her," Justice David May wrote. "... Certainly the district court could have found (the parents') denials were more persuasive. In that case, the court could have concluded that Trane carried his burden. But the court was under no obligation to reach that conclusion."The court also rejected Trane's argument that the district judge wrongly refused to recuse himself, and that the court considered inadmissible evidence in its post-remand hearing. On the latter issue, the court ruled Trane either failed to object to the evidence at the time, or in some cases even introduced it first himself.In addition to the girl's sexual abuse claims, Trane also was convicted of mistreating two male students who were repeatedly disciplined by being locked alone in a room for long periods, in one case totaling more than half the boy's total time at the school. Those allegations are among others brought by former students and their families in multiple lawsuits that alleged widespread sexual abuse by staff and other students at the school, mistreatment of student with special needs, and harsh and abusive discipline.A 2016 Des Moines Register investigation found scores of police calls to the academy over the prior three years, including at least five alleging sexual abuse. Despite these warning signs, the school had never been inspected by any state agency in its 13-year history, and a subsequent review by the Department of Education found that it misstated its educational accreditations and affiliations.An attorney for Trane did not respond to a message seeking comment on Friday's decision.William Morris covers courts for the Des Moines Register. He can be contacted at wrmorris2@registermedia.com, 715-573-8166 or on Twitter at @DMRMorris. Ray Herr reflects on how key players in Keokuk welcomed the Midwest Academy and didn't spot red flags pointing to likely abuse of troubled teens. When I was about to enter my senior year of high school, the community was abuzz about a new school opening on the edge of town. Keokuk had suffered a series of economic setbacks throughout the late 1990s that continued into the 2000s and up to the present day. The town had been hemorrhaging jobs for much of my childhood. Stone Container, originally founded as the Hoerner-Waldorf Box company in 1920, closed its doors in 2000. Metsco Minerals soon followed. Smaller stores like Osco Drug and Henke Hardware also closed around this time. Keokuk, which had been a shining example of the opportunity one could find in the industrial heartland of America at the turn of the last century, was in danger of falling into disrepair by the turn of the next century. I remember the anxiety in the community about job losses. My parents and their friends were all very concerned. So when Ben Trane and Brian Vaifanua facilitated the purchase of the Charleston Place Home, which had formerly served as a senior living facility on the edge of town, the news was widely seen as a sign Keokuk might yet endure. Trane and Vaifanua planned to open a boarding school for troubled youth from around the country. The local newspaper quoted mayor Dave Gudgel calling the project "The Miracle on the Mississippi." This may have been something of an exaggeration. But while the new Midwest Academy would not replace hundreds of lost factory jobs, it did provide 26 jobs at first, eventually increasing to 60 staff members, which, to its credit, paid well above Iowa's minimum wage. I remember a friend's sister working out there one summer while she was in college. She made good money, much more than she had made lifeguarding at the public pool previous summers. Another friend worked out there for all of eleven days before quitting in the summer of 2004. He described it as being like the Oregon State Hospital from the 1975 film adaptation of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." Other rumors and gossip circulated around town. I remember my dad at one point wondered if maybe the dual enrollment agreement with the Keokuk community school district (the one that would later be found to be in violation of state law by the board of education) would mean some of these rough-hewn bad boys could beef up our slouching football team roster. Keokuk had gone from a contender in Iowa 3A Football in 1999, to a team that was lucky to eke out the one win we had my senior year. In the August 26, 2003 edition of the Daily Gate City, Vaifanua thanked not only Mayor Gudgel, but also police chief RL Dobson, Keokuk superintendent Jane Babcock, and Lowell Junkins, the executive director of the Lee County Economic Development Group. Vaifanua said those local leaders were the reason he'd come here and proclaimed they had "done their homework" on him and his program. A follow-up article noted, Gudgel said he, Katie O'Brien, executive director of Keokuk Area Chamber of Commerce, and Dobson split the stacks of references the school provided and they contacted various communities. "We compared notes - they all said what a fantastic organization it is," he said. "And it brings money to the community. We were expecting - not wanting, but expecting - some negatives. We never heard any." That struck me as a red flag. How could there be no complaints from anyone they spoke to about a controversial institution like this? One possible explanation: imagine for a moment that you're a community leader. Are you going to bite the hand that feeds you when asked about an organization that brings a lot of money into your community? I would hope our leaders would do more than taking the promotional materials and the character references Vaifanua and Trane presented at face value. But I also would not be surprised if they didn't want to research the Midwest Academy any further. This proposal looked like a good deal for a struggling community. Perhaps didn't want to look beyond the surface for fear of losing out on the opportunity. Addressing the Keokuk Kiwanis Club in 2002, Junkins laid out a philosophy that I feel, perfectly explains the mindset of Keokuk's community leaders leading up to the deal with Midwest Academy. He stated that according to a study on successful communities, one of the four attributes which led to success was "aggressiveness in pursuing business and industrial prospects." Junkins went on to say, "It's vitally important the community warmly welcomes these efforts and new people who come to town." Ben Trane first came to town around this time. He met with Gudgel and Babcock to discuss purchasing the old Keokuk Middle School building. When that didn't prove financially feasible, Trane considered opening his school at another site in Wisconsin. The community leaders presented Trane with an alternative idea to purchase Charleston Home Place, just up the highway in unincorporated Lee County. At that point, Junkins got involved, stating, "Keokuk people were already courting this school, hoping to keep them from going north." In their zeal to bring new opportunities to the area, local boosters may have overlooked that Brian Vaifanua had previously operated a boarding school in Samoa called Paradise Cove. Paradise Cove was featured on Dan Rather's investigative journalism program 48 Hours in 1998. On the program, one mother's investigation uncovered that staff at Paradise Cove had been accused of using cattle prods, tasers, handcuffs, leg cuffs, and a straight jacket on teenagers at the facility. One alumnus of the program stated that while he had not been beaten, he had heard other students being beaten by staff members. Teens interviewed by the correspondent complained of basic hygiene issues like ringworm and scabies and complained they didn't even have hot showers. Vaifanua downplayed instances of violence by staff, including duct taping mouths to keep students quiet, telling the reporter such conduct was against the program's policy. Vaifanua also shrugged off the question about why there's no licensed therapist on staff, saying the program "isn't therapeutic" and that many of the teens enrolled in the program go home no longer needing the anti-depressants they were on when they arrived. As I watched the 48 Hours episode, Vaifanua struck me as a con man who preyed on desperate parents by setting up a program that was supposedly the answer for whatever ailed at-risk kids. Drugs, fighting, "acting out," disobedience. At about 13 minutes in, Vaifanua wipes a suspiciously quick tear in front of the camera. He just cares so much about setting these teens on the right path...and also charging their parents \$30,000 a year for a program where they slept on thatched mats and didn't have hot running water. "Running a business is expensive," said Vaifanua justifying the costs of his program. My bullshit sense was tingling. All of this raises the question, did Keokuk's community leaders know about Paradise Cove in 2003? Had they seen the 48 Hours piece? Did they know that in 1999 the U.S. State Department asked Samoan officials to investigate allegations of mistreatment, sexual abuse, and financial fraud at Paradise Cove and recommended parents visit schools in foreign countries themselves before sending their children there? Did they even bother to Ask Jeeves about Vaifanua? These are uncomfortable questions to ask, but I can't recall anyone else asking them. For most of my life, Keokuk has been in dire economic straits, and the economic impact Midwest Academy had on Keokuk during its 13-year run is nearly immeasurable. Court documents from Ben Trane's trial indicated that prior to the raid the FBI and the Iowa Department of Criminal Investigation conducted in 2016, the academy had contributed to the purchase of more than 60,000 meals from local restaurants, the use of more than 20,000 hotels rooms, provided more than 55,000 community service hours, and spent more than \$50 million in goods, services, and employee payroll." Community ties also included former Police Chief Tom Crew, who worked for the academy after retiring. His wife Cindy Crew worked there for ten years as well. Jane Babcock had a relative who attended the academy, and Tyler McGilly, former school board president, had been previously employed by the academy for about seven years. More recently, Devon Daile (who held a director position at academy when it closed) was later elected to the Keokuk City Council. He is now running for mayor. I'm not sure whether Gudgel, Babcock, Dobson, Junkins, or other local leaders who helped land the Midwest Academy deal knew about Paradise Cove. But none of this was a secret in 2003. While many allegations of abuse at Paradise Cove and affiliated schools came out later, plenty of information could have been found by anyone with the inclination to look. Using the Wayback machine at web.archive.org, I found multiple articles from the late 1990s and early 2000s detailing abuses at Paradise Cove. A 2001 article on Salon.com mentions not only Paradise Cove but also the Litchfield Family Partnership, the group that eventually purchased the Charleston Place property in Lee County in March 2003 for \$500,000. Robert Litchfield has had a long and storied career in the at-risk youth industry, beginning as the director of residential living at the Provo Canyon Boys School, which the state of Utah closed down in the late 1970s because of abuse, neglect, and maltreatment of clients. Litchfield came away from this unscathed but also with a new idea. What if they did more than just run the schools? Litchfield set up "referral agencies, escort services, a billing company and motivational seminars for parents." In essence, many hands washing each other, all designed to keep the money flowing into his organization. They did this by creating seemingly independent referral agencies that only referred parents to his schools. They also offered discounts to parents who referred other parents to them. Litchfield also lobbied members of the Utah state legislature, where two of his schools and the offices which oversaw nine other schools were located. He made numerous campaign contributions to state legislators who killed a bill which would have regulated private boarding schools by the state government. He had also previously landed in hot water in Costa Rica and the Czech Republic, where schools he was affiliated with were investigated and closed by local authorities in those countries after allegations of abuse in the 1990s. Tomas J. Croke was a Pennsylvania-based education consultant who ran Bridge To Understanding, a website that in the late 1990s helped parents of at-risk youth find resources. He also a web board where families could talk about their experiences and referred many to treatment centers that practiced the tough-love approach. Croke warned parents in 1998 that he was wary of the Litchfield Family Partnership: It has been stated to me over and over again by Narvin Litchfield and others associated with the group that the reason for the convoluted ownership situation, is to shield Bob Litchfield from liability. The issue is not the country in which the programs are located, although [the] way the offshore location is used by this group to lessen accountability is something I find distasteful. Other organizations with offshore programming have clear accountability to a US based corporation with available owners and directors. I know of no other treatment organization which has gone to the great lengths this group has to obfuscate the question of who is legally and morally responsible for the welfare of the children — whether in their stateside facilities or their offshore facilities — and professionally I cannot support that kind of thing. I stress, however, that I have no knowledge of anyone being harmed by them. Second, the use of marketing techniques which masquerade paid marketers as neutral referral sources raise issues in my mind about veracity in general.Third, these are clearly mass production facilities. Large numbers of kids are cramped into very small areas with at best limited opportunity to leave the campus areas except for those on highest levels. This goes directly to the issue of the intercultural benefits. Aside from Samoan staff, these kids — except at highest levels — are rarely off grounds and have little opportunity to mix with the local culture.We are not hostile to Samoan programming. If you look into the archives or BRIDGE on this web site you will see that we have been very positive about Robert Louis Stevenson Youth Academy, also in Samoa, and one of our primary attractions to that program is the open interaction between the students at RLSYA and the local culture, something I saw no evidence of at Paradise Cove. It also appeared to me that PC included many kids who were not appropriate for such an extreme setting. Extremely hard core kids may be very appropriate, if we can resolve the responsibility issues. But milder kids can get just as good, probably better service and results either here or in Samoa at roughly the same cost — or less.Tomas J. Croke As I dug my way down this rabbit hole, I found myself asking what was right. Was this as bad as it looked? News stories about these men and the programs they had operated always seemed to find glowing recommendations to place alongside accusations of abuse. Hindsight is 20/20, and it's easy for me to look back and judge our community leaders almost 20 years later, after Ben Trane's trial and conviction for abuse in 2017. Vaifanua and Trane put their best faces forward in 2003, even cherry-picking the first group of students and parading them in front of the community at a private open house. As far as allegations of abuse at Midwest Academy, there are almost too many to list, but the Lee County Sheriff's office stated that nineteen of the abuse accusations they investigated were founded, meaning there was some evidence backing up the claims made by students. Part of me very much wants to give our community the benefit of the doubt. But we welcomed Litchfield, Vaifanua, and Trane to town, gladly took their money, and patted ourselves on the back for helping these kids without a second thought. Anyone involved who can't concede even the slightest amount of culpability for this, who thinks they're completely blameless is frankly deluding themselves. We may not have known what kind of monster Ben Trane was in 2003, but there was plenty of evidence suggesting that we should not have wanted Keokuk to be associated with people like Litchfield and Vaifanua. I'm not sure economic desperation alone is enough to excuse how little I could find showing any due diligence went into this decision. A lot of the key players aren't around to answer these questions. Gudgel passed away in 2013, and Babcock transferred to the Prairie City, Iowa school district in 2008. More than anyone else, those two made Midwest Academy happen. It's entirely possible they didn't know what they were getting us into, but they probably should have. "The true rule, in determining to embrace, or reject anything, is not whether it has any evil in it; but whether it has more evil than good. There are few things wholly evil or wholly good. Almost everything, especially of governmental policy, is an inseparable compound of the two; so that our best judgement of the preponderance between them is continually demanded." Abraham Lincoln Ray Herr is a longtime resident of Lee County and graduate of Iowa Wesleyan University. A version of this post was first published at Hiding in the Tall Corn. Top photo of the former Midwest Academy building was taken by Ray Herr and published with permission.