

Lawsuit charges girls enslaved in homes

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HATTIESBURG, Miss. — A haven for world-weary teenagers or a horror chamber of religious fanaticism?
The Bethesda Home for Girls in rural Forrest County may become the federal court test for drawing the line between coercion and conversion, brainwashing and true belief.
The home is owned by Redemption Ranch Inc., and it adheres to the doctrines of the Rev. Lester Roloff, from whom the home was bought, and other fundamentalist preachers.

Roloff has been the target of a Texas investigation into his fundamentalist Baptist children's home in Corpus Christi.
The 60-plus girls who live at the isolated home appear scrubbed and healthy. Pregnancy has prematurely bloated the school-girl shapes of some, but all their faces are young and earnest.
Their dresses — culottes sometimes, but never pants — are long and loose-fitting. Their eyes are without makeup, their hair without spray or style.
"They weren't like this when they were brought here," says

Bob Wills, who owns and runs the home with his wife. "We're criticized for locking the doors, and people say to turn them loose."
"Turn them loose to what? Where are they going? Back to the dope hives and to living with four boys?"
Wills is a defendant in a Montgomery, Ala., federal court suit that charges the school holds its girls in involuntary servitude and peonage.
But Wills claims parents and pastors from all over the country beg him to take wayward girls

and turn them toward the fundamentalists' path of righteousness.
Wills says it makes the girls so mad "they can spit-nails" when they hear criticisms of the school. And when questioned, at least in the presence of Wills, the girls concur.
"Before I came here, my parents sent me to psychologists and psychiatrists, and nothing did any good," Cindy, a 15-year-old from Quitman, said. "Now I don't live for weekends anymore, I live for Jesus."
Tammy, 18, says she had

hepatitis before coming to the home 10 months ago, but: "I've gained 22 pounds since I've been here. I don't need drugs anymore because I've found Jesus."
Another girl has dropped 67 pounds since coming to the school, weight tte Wills decided she needed to lose. "She gets a whipping twice a day and a head of lettuce a week," quips Wills, alluding to charges in the lawsuit that the girls are routinely beaten and fed meager diets even while pregnant.
The school has in the past

admitted to using corporal punishment to enforce its strict rules, but Wills has denied charges of severe beatings.
Forrest County District Attorney Bud Holmes says he has investigated complaints stemming from Bethesda and the boys' home run by the Wills called Redemption Ranch. It, too, is near Hattiesburg.
"If they are doing something that breaks the law, I want somebody to bring it to my attention," Holmes said. "I'm not freaked out on religion; fanaticism is distasteful to me."

"But when you look and see the other side of the coin, where these kids would be, it's the lesser of the two evils."
Holmes says every grand jury that meets in his county is instructed to inspect the home. "They come back every time without anything," he said.
Wills says a strict routine of work and religion is the rule for occupants of his home. He says incoming and outgoing mail is censored to prevent drugs or runaway plans from being exchanged. The doors are locked to keep newcomers from running away, he says.



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