

Elite Boarding School for Troubled Teens Was Torture Chamber

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At John Dewey Academy (JDA) in Great Barrington, Mass., teenagers with a range of mental health issues were deprived of medication and proper treatment, and administered “attack therapy,” under the unchecked tutelage of Thomas Bratter, who himself had dubious mental health training and was found guilty of raping at least two of his own students in the nineties. Bratter died a folk hero among his followers in 2012, and for decades JDA has not been held accountable for its founder’s transgressions. The school continues to operate without transparency or regulation as part of the booming “troubled-teen” industry in the United States.

- By
- [Alissa Fleck](#)



When Kelsey took to Facebook in May 2020 to expose the abuse she had undergone at a handful of residential treatment programs as a teenager, it was meant to be a final act. By that point Kelsey, 28, had made two prior suicide attempts and she wanted the world to have an explanation when she finally completed the act, she’d later tell me of her decision to go public with a Facebook post. In fact, one of her first brushes with suicide had happened crammed in a bathroom stall at one of those treatment programs, when Kelsey stared down at the plastic bag in her hands and wondered if she had the time to suffocate herself before being discovered by staff members. She’d heard of someone else who successfully exited this world that way.

But what Kelsey did not expect was the outpouring of support — for so many people to reach out to her to talk about their own hellish experiences, or inquire more about and validate her own. Fighting to expose what had happened to her and so many others gave Kelsey a renewed sense of purpose. When she took to social media last spring to start telling her story, it had been over a decade since Kelsey had been one of those “troubled teens” shuttled away to various institutions, including one therapeutic boarding school tucked away in a faux-medieval castle in the Berkshires, called John Dewey Academy (JDA), which is still operating today.

“Dewey worked hard to erode family ties.”

Talia

Some of the methods used at JDA and other schools of its ilk are meant to be closely guarded secrets. But I drew a long list of sources intent on speaking out about what they had undergone, through engagement on Kelsey’s post, other internet forums and a network of ex-students who similarly recognized something was terribly wrong about their time at JDA, and other “therapeutic” boarding schools. In all, I spoke to nine formerly matriculated students, less than half of whom officially graduated from JDA. Some, like Kelsey, were okay with their real first names being on the record, while others asked that aliases be used to protect their identities (their names are asterisked). JDA has a tight-knit alumni community and speaking out against the institution can result in permanent exile from that community, former students say.

One of the individuals eager to speak early on was 31-year-old Jack*, whose time at JDA briefly overlapped with Kelsey’s, though the two barely knew each other then and have not kept in touch. This is not uncommon as it’s characteristic of JDA to discourage anything approaching authentic friendship among students, without ulterior motive. The first wave of the coronavirus pandemic had just paralyzed New York City, when Jack asked me to meet him in a downtown hotel. He insisted his experience of JDA needed to be recounted in person. But Jack’s presence was immediately troubling. His Facebook page teemed with ominous ramblings and prophetic conversations with himself. I learned from a police officer in Massachusetts that there were at least 98 warrants out for Jack’s arrest across jurisdictions for violating restraining orders, harassment and other charges.

I didn’t meet up with Jack who, as of this writing, is in [jail](#). While the former JDA students I talked to have wildly different life stories, they independently want to go public about what they endured at JDA and where their lives are now. Though some still hold conflicting emotions about the industry, most of them want to expose the troubled-teen industry for what they believe it is: a highly profitable but broken system that takes vulnerable kids who need serious help and applies a one-size-fits-all approach, to often catastrophic ends.

These adults want the rest of the world to know about the flawed promises that were made to them and their families in closed-door meetings, behind castle walls and elsewhere, along with the catastrophic ripple effect those un-fulfillable promises continue to have today. Their stories might help explain how a “therapeutic” boarding school could take kids who are already sick and make them so much sicker, while the people who are supposed to care for them look the other way.

The Castle

In 1985, 46-year-old Thomas Bratter — a large, domineering man with what his obituary would later describe as a “colorful personality” — decided to buy a castle. Searles Castle was originally built in the 1880s and designed by a New York architectural firm in their interpretation of the French “chateau” style, with seven stories, a dungeon basement and a blue dolomite exterior. Despite the castle’s natural grandeur, it’s not exactly an imposing presence in the small town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, where it’s set back on a tree-speckled lawn beyond a perimeter of looming stone walls. Driving through town, you could almost miss it if you didn’t know where to look.

Born and raised in Scarsdale, New York, and a graduate of Columbia College and Teachers College at Columbia University, Bratter was determined to carry out his vision of opening a school inside Searles Castle where he’d turn “bright, troubled adolescents” into Ivy League-ready pupils. His approach would not involve medication or traditional psychotherapy, instead Bratter intended to pioneer his own brand of tough love, or what’s known as “attack therapy.”

Attack therapy was not new on the scene when Bratter founded John Dewey Academy, named for an American educational reformer, though he would put his own unique spin on it. In the seventies, a form of attack therapy was infamously employed by members of the rehabilitation cult known as “Synanon.” In particular, the group played what came to be known as the “Synanon Confrontation Game,” in which members would encircle one victim at whom they would hurl unimaginable verbal abuse.

“I’m hoping exposing it will help me sleep at night.”

Rachel

Bratter’s approach was not that far off from earlier practitioners. In the abstract of a paper he published in 2003, titled “Confrontation Group Psychotherapy with Gifted, Dually Diagnosed, and Self-Destructive Adolescents in a Residential Setting,” Bratter wrote: “It takes a new breed of group leader to work with this difficult-to-treat youth...” Bratter fancied himself such a leader.

Much like the Synanon Confrontation Game, Bratter's treatment method hinged on co-ed, shame-based group therapy sessions in which adolescents were encouraged to be as confrontational and ruthless with one another as possible, about the flaws Bratter had determined were holding each of them back.

In addition to confrontational group therapy sessions, which could take place as many as ten times per week, Bratter prescribed a variety of other interventions, including strict diets, making students wear massive degrading cardboard signs for months at a time and even forcing them to dig their own graves.

Bratter's doctrine, according to ex-students and expounded upon in his writings, assumed every pupil who came through the castle was inherently a drug abuser whether or not they knew it yet, or had even touched a drug. This made an anti-medication stance absolutely critical to JDA's operations, and many kids aged 14 through 18 who came to JDA were taken off of medications cold-turkey. Kids taking high enough doses of medications, where it could be life-threatening if they quit, were sometimes weaned off of medication, ex-students report, though they say they don't remember licensed medical professionals being involved in this process.

A former student, who left the school in 2019, after less than a year, said the school was still against medication during his time there.

David McPhee, a now-retired clinician who spent decades working in the mental health field and who holds a PhD in Counseling and Student Personnel Psychology from the University of Minnesota, tells *The News Station* that, according to [the official handbook for professionals on prescribing for teen populations](#), "Meds for kids are a critically important component in their psychiatric care and in many cases can make a huge difference."

However McPhee explains that extra care and a high level of medical training is needed when prescribing, reducing, changing or discontinuing medications, especially when it pertains to kids.

"I am aware of the significant dangers associated with abruptly stopping some of these drugs, especially without close and regular monitoring," he says. "The only professionals qualified to deal with starting, managing, and stopping these medications are psychiatrists with competence in this area, and in certain instances, developmental pediatricians."

"If unqualified school personnel make such decisions without personal, direct, case-by-case, fully documented direction from a qualified medical professional, they must be seen as highly dangerous to children."

Yet Bratter was determined to corner the market for the delinquent kids of the East Coast elite who wanted to use their parent's endless resources to "have as much fun as possible," one former student recalls. However, it seems some of these kids were less "delinquents" than simply an inconvenience to their parents at the time.

Over the decades, as JDA's founder and head of school, Bratter scooped up a mishmash of depressed teenagers, miscreants and drug users, kids struggling with newly developed chronic illnesses — including mental health issues and mood or personality disorders — as well as kids on the autism spectrum. Anyone who could be labeled “troubled” and then pass the mercurial and by all accounts debasing Bratter entrance interview, stood a shot at gaining entry to Searles castle.

“There were kids there who never touched a substance but were just addicted to Warcraft,” Jeremy*, an ex-JDA student, tells *The News Station*. “You had kids that were fully autistic and Bratter would just yell at them. They were smart kids but their social cues were not the same.” I located Jeremy through a glowing review written by his mother of JDA online, and have changed his first name at his request. In 2010 Jeremy was 18-years-old and in high school when his parents decided to send him away to Searles Castle. He says his parents still buy into some of the industry's promises.

Bratter's refusal to accept that some kids in his care needed professional help beyond what his school could provide would result in catastrophic consequences.

Troubled Teens? Or Teens?

By the age of 15, Kelsey, a professional horseback rider who had always excelled in school, was used to being under pressure. So when she started struggling with bouts of depression in 2007, the extreme mood swings and slipping grades were foreign enough to alarm her parents. Kelsey saw a therapist who she remembers let her cry without judgment for what she felt was the first time.

Kelsey also went on antidepressants but had a bad reaction to the medication, which landed her in a psychiatric hospital for two weeks where Kelsey was further treated with the anti-psychotic Seroquel (a drug prescribed to treat a variety of mental conditions and mood disorders, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder). At the hospital, Kelsey recalls being shuttered in an attic and treated like a juvenile delinquent. All she knew was that she didn't feel right. The hospital one day informed her, to her surprise, that they were sending her to an outdoor wilderness program for “at-risk” kids.

After six weeks at a wilderness therapy program, Kelsey thought she would get to go home. But behind the scenes, the wheels of the troubled-teen industry were already turning, and instead, Kelsey ended up at a residential treatment center called Vista Magna Academy in Utah. Nearly all the kids who end up at JDA first cycle through some of the nation's other residential treatment programs, including wilderness programs or Vista.

At Vista, Kelsey was surrounded by kids, some as young as 14, ranging from those who seemed to have virtually no problems to those “literally selling sex for heroin.” She witnessed new levels of atrocities, including a teenage girl forced to spend two months in solitary confinement. Kelsey was also purposely, falsely diagnosed with HIV at Vista as part of her

“treatment.” She says counselors accused her of lying when she told them she wasn’t sexually active, and she believes the HIV hoax was a twisted scare tactic. It was there that Kelsey shut herself inside a bathroom stall and seriously contemplated ending her life.



Kelsey and Mike Zalenski on the Dewey Academy grounds. Photo from the academy

After Kelsey graduated from Vista, none of the schools back home would take her because for nine months she hadn’t gotten a proper education. Her parents wanted her to have the opportunity to attend a good college, so they hired an educational consultant. The consultant told Kelsey’s parents that JDA has a history of getting kids into good colleges and that she’d sent many kids there. It was enough to convince Kelsey’s parents.

There are eerily familiar echoes when Talia talks about how she ended up at JDA at the age of 14 and when Rachel talks about cycling through a series of residential programs before also landing at JDA at 15.

“I cut the occasional class, smoked cigarettes and hung out with my age-appropriate boyfriend,” Rachel, 28, who now works in marketing, tells *The News Station*. Rachel describes herself back then as a “14-year-old mall rat.” But her parents grew concerned. “They had been convinced I was literally going to die, so they sent me away.”

“My parents are pretty easily influenced,” she adds. “And these educational consultants are getting paid both by parents and by the institutions.” Predatory educational consultants are a recurring theme when talking to formerly “troubled-teens.”

Carol Maxym, whose LinkedIn profile describes her as president at Maxym Consulting, was one of the educational consultants responsible for sending kids to JDA, say sources. She was also dean of JDA back in the nineties, at the time Bratter was facing sex assault charges from a student, according to the Hartford Courant. Maxym did not respond to my request for comment.

Most formerly boarded-up teens say their parents were well intentioned, if a bit naive, and sought outside help out of desperation, believing they didn’t have the tools necessary to help their kids succeed. This is how many kids ended up stuck in the vicious cycle of the troubled-teen industry.

“I was a run-of-the-mill gifted kid; I loved school,” Talia tells *The News Station*. But Talia also had un-diagnosed chronic illnesses that were starting to come to the surface. After experiencing escalating panic attacks and outbursts of anger, Talia began engaging in self-harm, including cutting. Talia’s parents got scared for their daughter, and enlisted the help of educational consultant Lisa Benjamin. Benjamin, who, according to her LinkedIn profile now works as an “education coordinator” for a telecommunications company in Meriden, Connecticut, did not respond to requests for an interview.

Just like Kelsey, neither Talia nor Rachel had ever used drugs. But they did struggle with depression and other mental health issues.

Talia was first sent to a wilderness therapy program in Utah called Second Nature. “I didn’t get along with the girls there because they were all older teens and most of them had drug problems. and I was 14 and my problems were panic attacks and binge-eating,” she says. “I don’t even remember a specific moment when I realized I was going to JDA. I signed up [for the wilderness program] thinking I was going away for a few months and then I’d go home.”

In retrospect she realizes this shuffling of kids between schools is “industry standard.”

“I felt betrayed. When I realized I wasn’t going home, it was like, this is not what I signed up for,” Talia says.

At first, JDA meant freedom for Kelsey, because at Vista, kids were not allowed out of counselor’s line of sight.

“I was also pretty into the whole Stockholm Syndrome at that point, so they convinced me if I hadn’t gone there I would have been a drug addict,” Kelsey recalls. “They convinced me they saved my life.”

Upon first arriving at her new home in Searles Castle, Talia remembers, “It was this big old castle and I’m from the Harry Potter generation, so yeah, I was impressed.”

“I showed up at Dewey (JDA) and on my first day my mom described [Bratter] to me as ‘theatrical,’” Rachel says. “That’s a word I will never forget. It flashes before my eyes when I fall asleep.”

Attack Therapy

If JDA seemed to be brimming with new possibilities for kids leaving behind other brutal residential treatment programs, their optimism was quickly dashed. For Bratter’s brand of attack therapy and other eclectic interventions to work, there needed to be a hierarchy among students, who were always pinned against each other and encouraged to snitch on one another for minute trespasses. Friendships could not be sustained at JDA, where students were caught in a paradox of needing each other’s approval in order to succeed, while also encouraged to turn on each other at the first opportunity to save themselves.

“This is one of the things that is most toxic about these places,” Maia Szalavitz, author of *Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids*, and an outspoken critic of the troubled-teen industry, tells *The News Station*. “You have to betray your friends to save yourself; it makes you into a perpetrator.” Szalavitz, who attended Columbia University as an undergraduate and received a B.A. in psychology from Brooklyn College, was also the 2004 recipient of the American Psychological Association’s Addiction Division Award for “Outstanding Contributions to Advancing the Understanding of Addictions.”

Szalavitz uses the term “moral injury” to refer to what happens to an individual who is forced to do things they think are wrong, or watch others do things they think are wrong without being able to intervene. “This trains people to be sociopaths,” she adds.

McPhee agrees with Szalavitz, calling Bratter’s experiment “a perfect storm.”

“Get a pack of teens together, and add an unscrupulous but charismatic con-artist tasked with behavior modification. Single out a kid whose behavior you don’t approve of. Turn the other teens into a growling pack of shaming, rejecting, demeaning detractors, and you’ve got a kid who will conform, sooner or later, usually sooner,” McPhee tells *The News Station* over email. “It’s how to create a compliant member of Hitler youth, a member of a violent street gang, or a superficially compliant teen, as ‘troubled’ as ever, but able to fake quiet submission, and even express both fealty and gratitude to the tormentors.”

“So many of the kids I’ve spoken with who have been through these places just can’t have relationships,” explains Szalavitz. “They’re afraid they’re going to be hurt, or they have this weird compulsive honesty where if someone asks, ‘Do I look fat?’, they say, ‘yes.’ They’ve been taught that’s normal, prosocial behavior.”

“Girls were not allowed to have bodies.”

Talia

Understanding life at JDA, in part, means understanding Bratter’s own idiosyncrasies, according to many former students. Bratter grew up in an estate manor on the Hudson, before arriving at Columbia. Though he grew up around East Coast “elites,” Bratter took pride in being more “blue collar” in his attitude, Jeremy says. “He had that New-York-crass-in-your-face attitude.” Bratter didn’t just talk, he bellowed. Rachel says class division was a big focus of Bratter’s, and he never let students forget where they came from, taking any opportunity to remind them he had saved their lives.

“[His] dad was some super rich guy, and [Bratter] would never get to talk to his dad,” Jeremy tells *The News Station*. Jeremy spent a considerable amount of time with Bratter — even serving as his personal driver at one point — especially in later years when Bratter was in poor health. “His dad would say, ‘I got 45 minutes’ and pull out a pocket watch and then only give him 30 minutes. His dad was not present.”

Michael, 28, says Bratter zeroed in on him from the beginning because of how Michael’s own relationship to his father had been portrayed to Bratter by his grandparents. Michael says Bratter developed something like an obsession with Michael’s relationship to his father.

“I was a special project [for Bratter],” says Michael, who adds there was some “crime and drugs” in his family’s background and who says his family did not have the same financial means as other families who sent their kids to JDA. “I was one of the last students he really went all out on.”

Michael, like the others, believes Bratter’s methods were overall misguided. “I know [Bratter] was well-intentioned, but he would obsess about things — I didn’t get the benefit of Dewey because the focus was always on the thing with my father, and everything was always a test.”

In the school’s earlier years, Bratter recruited Brooklyn, New York-native Ken Steiner, who holds a master’s in social work, to serve as a clinician at JDA. But in many ways, students say Steiner was just as bad. “Ken was like a fox and Tom was a lion,” Talia says. “Group therapy was mostly two old men yelling at kids about the most graphic shit they could think of.”

“Girls were not allowed to have bodies,” Talia says of how Bratter essentially broke girls down into three categories: “Favorites, hot girls who were not his favorites and ‘disgusting.’”

“It wasn’t said in so many words,” she adds. “He would take his favorites under his wing.” Sources agree Bratter made a habit of making overtly sexual, demeaning comments to girls.

There are some things I hear from ex-students over and over. One of them is that Bratter undeniably had a “type.” He liked blondes, especially skinny ones, and particularly favored those who were of the East Coast elite. Bratter would pick favorites for preferential treatment and those who didn’t meet the specifications were victimized with arbitrary punishments.

“Gender plays a big part in how someone experiences the school,” Jeremy recounts. “Being a girl, and making them deal with their sexuality openly in front of guys that were their peers....that’s a lot.”

“One day a brunette comes in for an entrance interview and [Bratter] gives her a hard time about being there; he tells her if she really wanted to be there she would get on her hands and knees and beg him to let her stay,” Kelsey says. “So this girl gets down on her hands and knees like a dog and starts spilling her deepest, darkest secrets in front of 25 kids. She is hysterically crying. Tom is wide-legged and smirking. He says ‘nope’ and kicks her out.”

“He had this dirty old man energy,” Jeremy adds.

Bratter was known for his ruthless body-shaming regardless of a student’s gender or size. Nearly every former student I spoke to says Bratter encouraged them in no uncertain terms to lose weight, some at the risk of expulsion.

“Tom said to me, ‘if you really want to get a college recommendation letter, lose about 40 pounds,’” Jeremy recalls. Bratter also led students to believe his eccentric recommendation letters — which could be 20 – 40 pages long, or more, and brimming with alliteration — were their only ticket into a good college.

Standing at over six-foot tall, and by no means a trim man himself, Bratter insisted on strict diets for the school’s students.

“One of his clinicians told me at 16-years-old and 150 lbs (size 10) to eat 1,350 calories a day,” says Rachel. “I had to spend the summer after my freshman year of college in intensive outpatient ED treatment because I weighed 97 lbs and ate 800 calories a day. The IOP therapists were horrified about Dewey.”

“Imagine you had a mad scientist who wanted to do the *Hunger Games* on the island from *Lord of the Flies*,” Rachel says. “Tom Bratter was the mad scientist.”

“Tom was basically God at Dewey,” Kelsey agrees. “It was his doctrine.”

Bratter believed he knew every pupil’s problem and the appropriate punishment to help them overcome it. Yet Bratter’s seemingly arbitrary punishments included making students wear massive, humiliating cardboard signs for months at a time, that said things like “I’m a six-

foot asshole,” sleeping outside and even digging their own graves.

“I witnessed a few people who were made to dig their own graves,” says Talia. “For one girl it was a punishment for being actively suicidal. She had to dig a six-foot grave in November to confront the reality of her death or something. She was standing in freezing water out there digging for hours.”

Some of Bratter’s other notorious interventions included things like “scrubbing,” “closed house,” “sitting the chair” and being put on “mute ban.” During periods of “closed house,” which was a regular punishment that applied to all the students at the castle, Bratter would make the kids clean the castle top to bottom. They were allowed only six hours of sleep per night and a very limited rotation of food. Students could be expelled during “closed house,” which many saw as a way for Bratter to simply get rid of students he didn’t like, for trespasses as seemingly trivial as leaning on furniture.

“Sitting the chair” meant sitting alone in a publicly placed chair, facing a wall, for up to eight hours a day, and up to two weeks at a time. Anyone punished with “sitting the chair” was only permitted to silently journal during that time. When she was punished with “sitting the chair,” Talia says Bratter expected her to come to the conclusion, through her journaling, that her cutting was the result of her “hating herself.” Bratter saw her self-harming as a cry for attention and one of Talia’s first punishments was being required to wear long sleeves at all times.

But that’s not how she saw it. “I understood my self-harming as a really drastic release valve,” Talia says.

Being “put on mute” meant students were not allowed to speak except when called on in class, when called on in group therapy or in “approved therapeutic conversations.”

If it’s hard to understand why students might not rebel against these interventions, they say the explanation is twofold. First, Bratter had created an environment where peer approval was all that mattered, and there was the ever-present fear that if students got kicked out, they could go somewhere much worse. This was the fear that haunted Talia when she was put on mute.

“They’d say if we kick you out, you’ll go somewhere worse and it’s true, there are places that are worse. I didn’t want to be beaten and medicated against my will [at those other schools], but that doesn’t make what I went through okay.”

It might be natural to downplay what took place at JDA by saying it doesn’t compare to some of the physical abuse that has been documented at other institutions, but experts and veterans in the field caution against this thinking.

It's true that other residential treatment programs have gained notoriety for physical abuse, and while Szalavitz concedes "the physical stuff is awful," she says it's often the "psychological stuff" that does the most lasting damage. That said, at least two sources reported witnessing or seeing physical abuse take place at JDA.

"For teenagers, the pain of exclusion and rejection can hurt more than most forms of torture," McPhee says. "Sadly, it works for awhile, and horribly, unscrupulous and sadistic folks use it for profit, on children."

Bratter drew the line at accepting students he considered genuinely sick and in need of medication, which in his mind only applied to antipsychotics, say former students.

"He did believe psychotic disorders were real, but he didn't always believe everyone who had them was right about having them," Talia explains. She vividly remembers how tragically sideways this went for one teenage boy while she was there.

"One guy who had been on some very heavy antipsychotic medication when he arrived was weaned off it, everyone was excited to see him brighten up and stop showing the side effects," Talia says. "He was a lovely, smart, fun guy, and then he started experiencing a lot of scary violent fantasies that he didn't tell anyone about until someone uncovered a thing he'd written about burning the school down."

The castle still stands, but like so many other students, his departure from the fortress was ghostlike.

"I have no idea what became of him in the end," Talia says. "There was an attitude that nothing bad was ever Bratter's fault."

"There would be people that had recent suicide attempts and we were supposed to watch them," Jeremy says, even recalling a time he found himself tasked with trying to help an actively suicidal peer. He knew he was in over his head.

"I was just thinking I shouldn't be the one here administering help."

"In my adult life, I've met grown women who are exactly like me who didn't get sent away."

Rachel

Some former students and other supporters of JDA's methods see more nuance to Tom Bratter as a figure, and not all former students I spoke with consider themselves traumatized by the experience.

"I was screwing up pretty hard," Jeremy admits. "I had problems with drugs and my parents were drug-testing me but I kept failing."

“Then I went there and I got my stuff together and I grew a lot from the experience,” Jeremy says. “But that doesn’t mean I condone what happens there. My parents paid a lot of money for me to go there, and they just saw it as input versus output. I was a stronger person when I left.”

My sources say a year’s tuition at JDA could run between \$80,000 and \$100,000, which was typically not covered by insurance.

As to whether Jeremy needed an approach like Bratter’s, he says, “At JDA, they tried to scare me and say ‘you could have died.’ But the friends I was doing drugs with, they all got their shit together at the same time.”

“In my adult life, I’ve met grown women who are exactly like me who didn’t get sent away,” Rachel says.

And while some former students have nothing but negative memories of JDA, others, like Jeremy, are more conflicted about their time at the castle. “One day you’re getting chewed out by Tom and the next day you’re at his swimming pool... his wife would be there cutting watermelon slices.”

Jeremy himself was actually kicked out of JDA before he had the opportunity to graduate. He was one of a few sources who reported being kicked out for having a relationship with a student of the opposite sex.

Whether they remain traumatized by the experience or not, some ex-students aren’t wholly bitter toward Bratter either.

“While the school may have been unorthodox, which is putting it lightly,” says Helen*, 32, who graduated from JDA in 2007, “I was never harassed or abused by the staff, and never witnessed anything of that nature toward other students.” In fact, Helen says she credits other students and faculty members with showing her how to “live a full life in the years since.”

“Some people took another path and clearly have nothing but ire toward JDA and the faculty/student body. Not everyone who left the school was a success story, and many of those people seem quite resentful toward JDA and toward anyone who did have a positive experience there,” she adds.

Szalavitz provides an explanation for those who might justify what they went through at a school like JDA.

“People want to make meaning out of their suffering, and one way to do that is to say: I needed this experience to fix this,” Szalavitz says. “I always say, some people found meaning in the concentration camps, that doesn’t mean we set up concentration camps to give people a spiritual experience.”

“The fact that you had post-traumatic growth does not mean that trauma is good,” Szalavitz tells *The News Station*. “There are many people who come out and say, ‘those other people are whiners’ or ‘they didn’t do the work.’ The reality is that people who get better, they get better despite the experience, not because of it.”

All former students I spoke with point to the academic rigor at JDA which they say is unmatched, even at some of the country’s most elite undergraduate institutions. Many say the academic environment at JDA was so intense, they found it significantly more difficult than their subsequent undergraduate experiences. And for the most part, the teachers were kept largely separate from the residential atmosphere and overtly toxic culture.

“Some of the teachers in the humanities department were wonderful. I have nothing but good things to say about them,” Talia says. “I think they had some idea [JDA] was not a healthy environment.

“An Inexplicably Mild Sentence”

In 1998 Bratter was indicted on three counts of rape and two counts of indecent assault and battery against one of his students. Court records state that in April 1994, Bratter “accompanied the alleged victim on a trip to visit Boston College where she had been accepted as a student.”

Court records show that while Bratter scrambled to discredit this particular accuser, his indecent behavior was starting to become a pattern. On June 21, 1995, *The Hartford Courant* reported, “The president of a school for emotionally disturbed students” would “receive a suspended one-year sentence and three years’ probation after accepting a plea bargain in a sexual-assault case involving a teenage student.” According to the *Courant*, Bratter, then 55, “was charged with sexual assault after a 17-year-old Massachusetts girl alleged that he had repeatedly assaulted her at his Salisbury home from March until June of 1993.”

“This whole unfortunate, unhappy business has had no impact on the school,” Dean of Students Carol Maxym told the *Courant* at the time. “Mr. Bratter’s reputation is really very strong.”

Even with his qualified admission of guilt, Bratter never saw jail time. Under the agreement with Assistant State’s Attorney David Shepack, Bratter would be required to perform 500 hours of community service and donate \$50,000 to a charity that “deals with victims of crime or abuse.”

More serious charges never seemed to stick to Bratter who continued working at the school up until his death in 2012. Ex-students of JDA talk openly about the rape charges against Bratter, which they say he successfully — and disturbingly — explained away to parents who kept sending their kids to JDA by discrediting his accusers as “troubled.”

There's no evidence Bratter ever changed his ways. "He said sexually disgusting things to all of us all the time," Rachel, who attended JDA between June 2008 and August 2009, says. "When I was 17 he told me I was going to die on my back with a big black cock in my ass."

Rachel was also punished at various points with being forced to sleep outside on the castle's back porch and wear one of Bratter's signature cardboard signs. But it's that particular comment that sticks with her after all these years. "I've thought about that comment every day for a decade," she adds. "I remember so vividly wanting to ask him why the color of the cock mattered, but didn't dare. He was an old racist. He was not kind to the one black boy I saw walk through those doors."

Despite the many who have seemingly been complicit in covering up the extent of Bratter's damage, there are voices of dissent toward his methods on Reddit and other similar internet forums. The word "cult" has been used to describe Bratter and his proponents, though Bratter was always the first to insist he wasn't leading a cult, say his ex-students.

JDA again faced legal consequences in 2004 when the Helfands, parents of an ex-student, filed a lawsuit against the school alleging a teacher at the school, Gwendolyn Hampton, had repeatedly raped their 16-year-old son after plying him with drugs and alcohol. Hampton became pregnant by the Helfands' son — twice.

I did get in touch with Hampton, who now goes by Gwendolyn VanSant, but when I explained my interest, she stopped responding. Hampton never faced criminal charges because the legal age of consent in Massachusetts is 16. Court records show the Helfands paid \$110,000 to send their son to JDA for two years. In 2007, Hampton went on to found BRIDGE, a "grassroots organization dedicated to catalyzing change and integration through promoting mutual respect and understanding," where she is also the CEO. According to the company's website, in 2020, "Gwendolyn VanSant, CEO, [received the] MCLA President's medallion for its 125th year anniversary celebration in recognition of BRIDGE's work and mission."

More recently Kelsey says she tried to bring legal charges against the school but was told the statute of limitations has expired. Other ex-students continue to seek out attorneys and explore their legal options.

For those I found willing to talk, there were many more who refused to speak about Bratter or JDA. Columbia University Medical Center categorically passed on my request to talk about Bratter's treatment methods. Though not a graduate of CUMC, Bratter had strong connections at Columbia University, where he ended up sending many of his students. He donated generously to the school throughout his life.

"Bratter said he could get anyone into Columbia," Michael says.

The Wounds Remain Open and Raw

Most people familiar with JDA hear about it through an educational consultant, like Lisa Benjamin, who was responsible for referring multiple ex-students with whom I spoke. Benjamin did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

Some of the former JDA students I spoke to have good relationships with their parents, and a similar number describe their relationships as strained. Some say their parents regret sending them to the school, while others say their parents remain “brainwashed” to varying degrees by the industry’s promises.

“They groom parents in these programs to think that any complaint [by their kids] is a manipulation,” Kelsey says.

“Some of these parents are lonely and they get a sense of community when they come for parents’ weekend,” Jeremy explains. “I see these parents on Facebook still interacting with each other’s posts.”

This sense of community stands in stark contrast to life in the castle. At JDA, students were not permitted to have contact with anyone besides immediate family on the outside, if that.

“Dewey worked hard to erode family ties,” Talia says. “They said we were too dependent on each other and banned me from talking to my family for six months.”

A few months after Kelsey first spoke out, socialite Paris Hilton made waves by coming out about her own experiences at Provo Canyon, a “therapeutic” boarding school in Utah. The “Breaking Code Silence” movement came about shortly thereafter — a movement “organized by a network of survivors and activists to raise awareness of the problems in the Troubled Teen Industry.”

The mission to hold this industry accountable has reached Congress, where it remains in limbo. In 2008 Rep. George Miller (D-CA) introduced a bill to regulate the troubled-teen industry, which passed the house twice but was never signed into law. In 2017, after Miller retired, Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) took over the cause, re-introducing legislation via the *Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act (SCARPTA)*. Schiff’s co-sponsors on the bill are Rep. Katherine Clark (D-MA-5) and Rep. Gwen Moore (D-WI-4).

JDA was almost closed a few times, most recently in the early days of the pandemic, before it was acquired at the eleventh hour by the current head of school, David Baum — a PhD from Yale in renaissance history, and a former history teacher at the school — who told *The News Station* that he’s never personally met Bratter, but thought the school had done “spectacular work” during his own time there as a teacher. Steiner served as Bratter’s right-hand man for most of his reign and took over the school after Bratter’s death, bringing Baum on as a teacher in 2015. Steiner, who eventually stepped down from the school after receiving a cancer diagnosis, did not respond to requests for an interview.

Baum says JDA will officially be moving out of Searles Castle and onto a new campus in Great Barrington at the end of the summer. He says he's changed the school from what it looked like under Bratter — that the goal is no longer to “shame kids” or “break their will.”

It's hard to get a sense of how much things have actually changed at JDA since Bratter's death though. According to one former student, Tyler*, the school has only made minor changes to its operations. Tyler attended JDA between 2018 and 2019 after being sent away at the age of 17 for underachieving in high school due to a variety of underlying anxiety-related conditions. Tyler describes hearing rumors about JDA during Bratter's reign, though six years had passed since Bratter's death when he showed up at the castle. Tyler says while he heard the school had relaxed some of its rules after Bratter's passing, at his time of attendance, the school still used peer-led attack therapy, diet-based interventions, “closed house,” “scrubbing,” and “sitting the chair.” Tyler ultimately left JDA for a different young adult program, but declined to expand on the circumstances.

Baum says while he never knew Bratter personally, he finds the depictions of many of his interventions, including having students dig their own graves, unethical — and in some cases even illegal — and he “won't allow [them] anywhere near [his] school.”

However, Baum acknowledges he has kept alive aspects of the culture that Bratter created and cultivated at JDA, including still using some of the original jargon. The “peer-led” nature of the school is also “all Bratter,” he adds. Baum says students still “sit the chair,” and while students can no longer categorically put on “mute ban,” students can be banned from interacting with each other individually.

Baum, who has no mental health qualifications himself, says the school works with a consulting psychiatrist now, as well as a staff psychologist, and students are sometimes put on medication when it's warranted.

“I'm not a psychiatrist, so if a psychiatrist says they need to be on medication, then ethics and the law say we need to put that kid on medication and so we do,” Baum says. “It's not the old days of: get off medication or get out of the castle.”

The school also still uses educational consultants, among other forms of solicitation and outreach, according to Baum, who says one of the most important changes he has made to the school was turning it into a non-profit. He says the program's annual tuition is \$98,000 and at any given time JDA has between 15 and 20 students.

Szalavitz believes residential treatment programs — if they are used at all — should only be used in certain individualized, extreme cases and they shouldn't look anything like the therapeutic boarding schools that exist now. Szalavitz says the best treatment for the “troubled teens” who wind up at a place like JDA is typically compassionate individual and relational family counseling with a licensed professional, while remaining rooted in the familial environment. Studies show that the way to help these kids is to increase the number

and quality of their relationships, she explains, not to shame them. And if a kid is addicted to drugs, interventions should be aimed at keeping that kid safe while treating them for drug addiction, not thrusting them into an environment that could make them so much sicker, Szalavitz says.

Ex-JDA students say what happened to them cannot be allowed to happen again. They want the schools committing abuses against kids to be closed down, and stricter regulation of residential treatment programs, which — if they exist at all — must be for the benefit of kids and young adults, not for the profit of the educational consultants and institutions like JDA.

“For me it’s like I’ve been having nightmares for 11 years and no amount of therapy or medication has helped that,” Rachel tells The News Station. Altogether, Rachel spent 1,177 days of her youth stuck in the troubled-teen industry. “I’m hoping exposing it will help me sleep at night.”

“I’m just happy it’s all getting out there,” Kelsey says of coming forward about what she went through and her mission to inspire others to do the same. “Tom should never have died a hero.”

Of Bratter, who passed away at 73, from heart disease, in 2012, Jeremy sums it up this way:

“He could be really caring and he really did help a lot of people, but the question is: at what cost?” Talia says she doesn’t think Bratter thought of what he did as abuse. “He genuinely believed in tough love, he felt genuine love for his students — and he was a monster.”

Alissa Fleck

Alissa Fleck is an independent investigative journalist pursuing a second master’s degree in criminal investigation. She also works with a PI firm that helps locate missing and trafficked children. Her [full bio is here](#).

