

WHEN REHABILITATION FAILS SLAYING WEAKENS LONG-HELD BELIEFS OF MAXEY SCHOOL

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When a disturbed student at W.J. Maxey Training School grabbed a teacher last summer and held the sharpened point of a wooden ruler to her throat, **Jermell Johnson** was among those who rushed to the rescue.

It was a dramatic example of the Maxey philosophy at work in the rehabilitation of young criminals: You are part of a group, and the group is responsible for keeping its members in line.

Friday, **Johnson** , 19, stood alone in a small district courtroom in Howell, charged with murder in the strangulation of a Maxey counselor. The slaying of Barbara Synnestvedt, 46, was the first in Maxey's 30-year history and has shaken the institution's philosophy to its foundations.

It also has amplified a growing dispute between law enforcement and the state Department of Social Services over how to handle increasingly violent young criminals -- how to balance safety and security against the opportunity to salvage a young life that was probably damaged by abuse and neglect.

The focus has been on Green Oak, Michigan's only maximum security facility for young criminals. The fenced complex, to all appearances a prison, sits across M-36 from the main Maxey campus and houses about 100 of Maxey's 440 residents. **Johnson** , a convicted rapist from Detroit, had been there since 1990.

The youths at Green Oak Center are generally considered to be the most dangerous in the DSS system, including about 40 who, like **Johnson** , were tried as adults for offenses such as murder, rape and armed robbery -- punishable by up to life in prison. But judges then opted to sentence them as juveniles, placing them in DSS custody as a final alternative to a long stretch in adult prison.

Most of the youths at Green Oak have failed in previous placements, whether in less secure units across M-36 on Maxey's main campus, or in private facilities like Starr Commonwealth or Boysville.

Besides the killing Sunday and the attack on the teacher last August, other recent incidents at Green Oak include:

* The escape in September of a 17-year-old convicted murderer and extortionist from Detroit who was on a group outing at an Ann Arbor mall despite a court order that was supposed to confine him to Green Oak. The youth was caught a month later when a sheriff's deputy recognized him at a court hearing for a friend facing drug charges.

* The assault in September of a female social worker who was punched in the eye by a 17-year-

old youth.

* An assault in October on a male youth specialist by an 18- year-old Detroit youth sent to Green Oak for felonious assault.

* The assault last April of a 17-year-old arsonist and car thief, who was hit over the head twice with a chair by another youth; the victim required numerous stitches. His attacker was sentenced to 3-10 years in prison.

Assaults not reported?

Livingston County Prosecutor David Morse said that in the last 18 months, his office has had a marked increase in requests for criminal prosecutions of residents at Maxey, for crimes more serious than in the past.

Morse believes there are even more assaults than are being reported.

"We have long suggested that they report the assaults at Maxey, but they want to continue counseling," he added. "They think that will do the trick and if they turn them over for prosecution, the rehabilitation ends and they end up in the Department of Corrections. But my point is, the rehabilitation doesn't appear to be successful."

Success rates for Maxey and Green Oak are hard to gauge. The most recent DSS report available showed that of 11 youths released from Green Oak from July to December 1992, only two had been arrested again for new offenses.

That compares with 19 arrests among 38 youths released from other parts of Maxey during the same period. The arrest rate for all youths released from DSS training schools dropped in 1992 to 43 percent, compared to 50 percent in 1991, according to DSS.

Releasing hostility, anger

The state officials who run Maxey believe that youthful acting out, even fighting, to a certain extent, can be a sign that attempts to reach an extremely damaged boy finally are working. The theory is that hostility and anger buried deep in the youth's psyche will surface sooner or later and is better handled in the confines of Maxey, among peers who know what it feels like.

"In simple terms, these kids are sitting on a keg of unresolved, intense emotional pain that they're not necessarily even conscious of," said Dr. Daniel DeZura, consulting psychiatrist at Green Oak. "The way they deal with it is to disconnect themselves from it. . . . But that has a great price and they end up disconnected from painful traumatic memories and also disconnected from the ability to enjoy their curiosity and their ability to learn."

The rehabilitation program at Green Oak is called Guided Group Interaction or GGI, a more structured form of PPC, for Positive Peer Culture, used on the main Maxey campus.

Under PPC, the youths are divided into groups of 10. Group members live together, attend school together and do activities together. They are expected to keep each other in line and correct misbehavior. When a group member acts out, the others work to stop his behavior by surrounding him or holding him down on the floor, and demanding an explanation.

Peer pressure is used to get the youths to recognize their problems and begin respecting other people.

GGI uses similar concepts but with more guidance from adult staff members. In group therapy sessions, members are encouraged, even required, to describe their crimes in minute detail and to recount their childhood histories in which they experienced abuse and neglect.

When trouble breaks out, group members are supposed to act quickly to control whoever is causing it.

If a group member starts plotting to escape, others are supposed to report him. If they fail to do so, privileges such as television and recreation time are suspended for the entire group.

When they work, PPC and GGI touch raw emotions inside children who in many cases have committed savage crimes or been subjected to horrible abuse.

\$170 a day at Maxey

"You have to be comfortable with sitting in a group of homicidal kids and talking about homicide," said Dr. Robert Sain, a consulting psychiatrist who works on Maxey's main campus.

"In fact, when they talk about homicide, they get in touch with the impulse and all of a sudden any one of us could be the next victim," Sain said. "To encourage those kinds of feelings to come out and to understand where they come from is very tricky. It can take us 10 months to get to the point where these kids are doing very powerful work.

"In some of these halls, as long as we keep kids from killing one another and raping one another, from my perspective, we're doing a major job."

Such rehabilitation is expensive. At Maxey, it costs more than \$170 a day per youth, compared to less than \$50 a day per prisoner in adult prison. Maxey's annual budget is more than \$25 million.

That high cost has led state DSS Director Gerald Miller to embark on an ambitious program of alternative community-based programs for nonviolent juvenile offenders, theoretically allowing the state to close some beds at Maxey.

The program, however, is months behind schedule because of resistance among juvenile court workers and local county delinquent services workers and disputes between Wayne County and DSS over who would oversee the programs. Additionally, Maxey staffers say there aren't many nonviolent youths among the residents.

Meanwhile, the killing has fractured the uneasy peace which usually prevails on the Maxey campus.

"It's tough on the kids," DeZura said. "A lot of them have become afraid. They've made a lot of progress and they see something happen like this with someone who was making progress.

"A lot of them have witnessed great atrocities in their lives and this brings it all back for them. But they're doing good, they're hanging together and I hope a lot of growth will come from this tragedy."

WHAT MAXEY IS

The W.J. Maxey Boys Training School near Whitmore Lake, north of Ann Arbor, is operated by the Michigan Department of Social Services to rehabilitate delinquent youths. Built in sections during the 1950s and 1960s, it includes:

- * The Sequoyah, Olympic and Summit medium security centers, housing youths committed by juvenile courts.
- * Green Oak Center, a maximum security facility where people up to age 21 are held for crimes such as murder, rape and armed robbery.
- * Huron Center, which treats seriously disturbed or mentally impaired youths.

CENTER FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS

Recent violent incidents at Maxey Training School, and especially at its Green Oak Center, highlight a growing debate over how to handle young, violent offenders. The focus at Maxey is on rehabilitation. Green Oak, where a counselor was strangled to death on Sunday, is the state's only maximum security facility for juvenile and young adult offenders.

Caption: Photo Color DAYMON J. HARTLEY; Map CATHY MORRIS

: **JermellJohnson** , right, at his arraignment Friday in the death

of Barbara Synnestvedt ***

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