

Episcopal school accused of ignoring bullying of ex-student

By Abe Levy

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A former boarding student at a private North Side Episcopal school says a bully threatened to sexually assault him with a lit blowtorch, one of a string of hazing incidents last fall, according to a lawsuit filed Tuesday by the boy and his family in Bexar County District Court.

The family — who lives in California — enrolled the boy last summer at TMI — The Episcopal School of Texas, where he was in its cadet program. He said he was 15 at the time of the harassment that started in mid-August and continued through October.

The San Antonio Express-News does not identify underage victims of alleged abuse.

The suit describes a night when a group of students burst into his room and pinned him down in his bed while one waved a lit blowtorch in his face and “made repeated threats to rape him.”

The suit names TMI and the San Antonio-based Episcopal Diocese of West Texas. The school was founded in 1893 by an Episcopal bishop.

The suit, which does not specify damages, accuses them of ignoring warnings from the parents and boy despite the school's zero-tolerance hazing policy.

“You're entrusting your child to a boarding facility that's supposed to be one of the best in Texas and the nation and one run by a church,” said Tahira Khan Merritt, the family's attorney based in Dallas. “You certainly don't expect to be abused.”

Formerly an all-boys school called Texas Military Institute, TMI has more than 400 students in grades 6-12 and is known for its faith-based college-preparatory programs.

Located between the Rim shopping center and the Dominion subdivision, the school has graduates who make up a local “who's who” list, from banker Tom Frost to U.S. Rep. Lamar Smith.

School officials referred the matter to the Guerra DeBerry Coody public relations firm, whose spokeswoman Trish DeBerry said they are declining to comment until formally receiving the suit. A spokeswoman for the diocese also declined to comment for the same reason.

The suit said the boy's first few weeks at the school were uneventful.



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He joined the football team and went on camping trips. He was following in the footsteps of his grandfather, described in the suit as a “legacy” graduate of TMI with a “distinguished military career.”

But the bullying soon started, with students calling him “gay” and “Nazi,” the suit says.

His father confronted school officials, who reassured him such incidents would cease, the suit says. Instead, the alleged bullying continued, including an incident in which students threw him against a wall, grabbed his throat, and chased him around the dorm.

The boy then bumped into a dorm parent, who vowed to address the problem, the suit says.

After the alleged blowtorch incident, the boy was visiting his parents in October when he informed them of his continued troubles, the suit says.

He and his father claim they returned to the school immediately, removed his belongings from the dorm, and filed complaints with the police and Child Protective Services. The suit says the boy is in counseling from the trauma.

The Bexar County district attorney's office reviewed related allegations against six students, said Assistant District Attorney Cliff Herberg. One student accused of making a terroristic threat agreed to a probation program, he said, but all other cases were dismissed last week for lack of evidence.

The alleged victim could only identify the one individual, he said.

“We were unable to find any weapons or torches related to the allegations after searching the rooms,” he said. “And there were no physical injuries.”

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