

Six camp counselors charged with murder in restraining death

Six counselors at a state-run wilderness camp for troubled boys have been charged with murder in the death of a 13-year-old boy who was restrained for more than an hour.

A White County grand jury handed down the charges of felony murder, child cruelty and involuntary manslaughter Monday.

Travis Parker died April 21, a day after he was held face down by counselors at the Appalachian Wilderness Camp in Cleveland, in the North Georgia mountains. The boy had angrily confronted one of the counselors for withholding food from him as punishment. His family's attorney, Thomas Cuffie of Atlanta, said a judge had ordered the youth to attend the camp.

Parker had asthma and was denied his inhaler during the restraint. A medical examiner ruled the death a homicide.

"This is all based on the criminal negligence or reckless conduct of these individuals," said White County District Attorney Stan Gunter. "It was due to the restraint, and how they applied it, that has led to these charges."

The counselors were expected to turn themselves in to the White County Sheriff's Office on Tuesday, said Abbi Taylor Guest of Decatur, the attorney for counselor Mathew Desing.

Parker's family did not comment Tuesday on the charges but Cuffie said Parker's mother, Golden Griffin, and family members were "quite pleased."

"Ms. Golden Griffin would like to see the individuals involved prosecuted because she thinks the evidence that she's seen so far warrants that type of treatment," Cuffie said.

Guest said the counselors restrained the boy as they had been taught.

"They were doing what they were trained to do," Guest said. "This is clearly not a case of counselors gone awry."

Desing "cared very much for the children he worked with, and he cared very much for the job of helping those children," she said.

But Gwen Skinner, an official at the Georgia Department of Human Resources, which oversees the camp, said the counselors were not following agency rules or procedures.

"We do not train staff to do face-down restraints," she said.

The other five counselors who were indicted were Ryan Chapman, Paul Binford, Torbin Vining, Johnny Harris and Phillip Elliott.

Travis, who was from Douglas County, had been sent to the camp in February. He was on probation after hitting his grandmother, who raised him, and threatening her with a knife.

Since his death, the state has retrained staff on the use of restraints and is reviewing its policies on when restraints may be used, officials said.

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