

Ten teen rehabs have sprouted in O.C.'s eclectic equestrian corner, Orange Park Acres

Horses are startled and quiet is compromised by sirens and community's new dramas, neighbors say



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PUBLISHED: January 17, 2020 at 1:31 p.m. | UPDATED: January 20, 2020 at 11:02 a.m.

Statuesque horses marched down a sun-dappled trail in Orange Park Acres, little girl riders perched astride, when a young man sprinted past them — another runaway from one of the neighborhood's ten teen-focused addiction rehab houses.

"I'm yelling at him, 'Slow down! I've got a line of beginner riders behind me,'" said Sherry Hart Panttaja, the woman who, last summer, was leading the girls. A year earlier, Panttaja had been thrown by her horse after the animal was startled by a delivery van bringing products to those rehab houses. She feared the runner would prompt similar responses for the young riders in her care.

The young man growled before running out of view, she said. And, soon after, Panttaja said she and the girls watched a rehab worker shoot by, hot on the escapee's heels.

The scene wasn't a one-off. Police sirens and the incidents that prompt them have become facts of life in Orange Park Acres, neighbors said, now that [Newport Academy](#) has grown to own 10 local homes for troubled teens

Just 1.4 square miles, with no sidewalks or street lights, Orange Park Acres is a small, expensive, equestrian corner of Orange County, a place where the Wild West meets Mid-century modern on sprawling lots of at least 20,000 square feet. The community is studded with horse stables and swimming pools, fenced riding trails and multi-million dollar homes.

And, lately, as Newport Academy's presence has expanded, the level of local conflict has grown beyond the usual complaints levied when rehabs and addiction treatment centers move in next door.

"These are *kids*," said an Orange Park resident who declined to speak on the record. "I have a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old. All I can think about is, 'If these were my kids....'" she said, her voice trailing off. "You need to be protecting them."

While many Newport Academy graduates see the program as a godsend that saved their lives, neighbors see a business that has shattered the neighborhood's peace.

Since 2017, local police and sheriff departments responded to more than 200 emergency calls connected to Newport Academy addresses in Orange Park Acres. These included more than 40 reports involving "missing juveniles," or runaways; and 17 calls for minors posing a danger to themselves or others, resulting in involuntary holds, according to data from the Orange Police Department and Orange County Sheriff's Department.

Teens running away from Newport Academy homes in Orange Park Acres have been found hiding in foliage, behind garages, wandering at night in dark and dangerous streets, neighbors said. Some have appeared on front porches at the crack of dawn, beseeching neighbors to help them escape.

"You can imagine how petrified I was when my back doorbell rang at 2 a.m.," said Dave Swoish, who said he responded to rattling doors with gun in hand. "Somebody is yanking on those doors trying to get into my house."

It turned out to be a confused young man from Newport Academy looking for his girlfriend's place, said Swoish, who remains haunted by the incident, which took place several years ago.

"If we had left that door unlocked, that kid would have been dead."

Of the 204 emergency calls examined, more than 20 involved mental health crises, including at least three attempted suicides. There were two reports of lewd conduct involving minors, as well as reports of an assault, battery and burglaries, according to the data.

During the holidays, a notoriously stressful time — and after the data cutoff for this report — several more emergencies were reported to police or sheriff officials.

Resident Brad Banks said he was heading home on Orange Park Boulevard last month, just after sunset, when he spied a young man stalking down the middle of the busy street. Trailing behind the boy, hazard lights flashing, was a Newport Academy van, keeping a slow, silent watch.

"I've seen that a million times," Banks said. "They follow these kids. They don't say anything, they're just following them, letting them do whatever they're going to do. I've seen the vans turn completely sideways to block the street. I've seen kids sit down in the middle of the street. I've seen kids refuse to get into the van and keep walking, turn down a horse trail and take off. A lot of times they don't even have shoes."

When Banks rolled down his window, the young man cursed him ferociously. Banks' wife and child were in the car.

"He was just so angry," Banks said. "It's a sad thing."

Niche market

Newport Academy is the brainchild of Jamison Monroe Jr., who wrestled with his own demons — and substance abuse — growing up in Texas.

Monroe, 38, went through several treatment programs before finally getting the help he needed at a Malibu rehab, he [told Bloomberg News in 2016](#). He saw an opening in the rehab market for a program that's specifically tailored to teens, and in 2009 he opened the first two Newport Academy homes — one for boys, and one for girls — in Orange Park Acres.

The company's web site describes its mission this way: "We bring teens from self-destruction to self-esteem by treating primary mental health issues which addresses the underlying causes of high-risk behavior. We treat individuals, ages 12-22, struggling with teenage depression, teen anxiety, and trauma-related issues, along with co-occurring eating disorders and teenage substance abuse. Newport Academy is a different kind of teen rehab center. Through our clinical expertise and holistic care, we empower teens and restore families."

The daily schedule is "therapeutically rigorous and engaging," with family visits every weekend. Horse therapy — something uniquely suited to Orange Park Acres — is an important part of the program.

"Equine-assisted therapy is particularly powerful for teens because it allows them to address emotions and issues through a direct experience of nonverbal communication," Newport Academy's web site says. "(L)earning how to work with and take care of a horse, with the guidance of an equine therapist, helps clients practice empathy and develop authentic connections."

The mission is to provide evidence-based healing in a supportive, loving, family-style environment, said an emailed statement from Newport Academy CEO Joe Procopio.

Some Newport Academy alumni swear by it.

Caden, whose last name is not being used to protect his privacy, had been to other treatment centers before landing at Newport Academy in 2014, when he was 16.

"Newport Academy was just different," he said. "I went in there not really knowing who I was, depressed and anxious. The staff had a lot of knowledge of what worked for them. And (they) were able to show me what they did to stay sober and live happy. They just seemed to care a lot more than any of the other places."

Caden was at Newport Academy for about three months. He said he achieved sobriety there and has been sober ever since. Now 22, he works in the treatment industry in Riverside County.

"I'm able to be a productive member of society."

Such programs are direly needed, CEO Procopio said, citing federal [statistics](#) that show 9% of California's high school students — roughly 400,000 teens — have reported at least one suicide attempt. "California struggles with higher rates of depression and suicide among adolescents than the rest of the nation. Clearly, more mental health treatment options are needed," Procopio said in the statement.

Getting bigger

Newport Academy has ramped up efforts to meet demand.

From 2009 through 2015, Newport Academy had two homes in Orange Park Acres, each housing six residents, the maximum allowed without a special permit. In 2015, Newport Academy asked the city of Orange for permission to double the number of kids allowed in one house, to 12, and add two more in the other house, to 8.

The city declined. “In a residential area, you can have a facility like that with only six people,” said Leslie Roseberry, the city’s planning manager, at the time. “If they were going to find another house at another location, they would be entitled to have six residents there.”

That’s exactly what Newport Academy did.

The state issued licenses to two more Newport Academy houses, each for six residents, in 2016. Two more were licensed in 2018 and two more, again, in 2019. Also, two more licenses are pending, according to Department of Social Services data, and Newport Academy’s parent company is in escrow on a \$2.3 million home on Woodview Circle, a deal that neighbors might challenge in court.

If all were licensed, that would bring the total number of Newport Academy homes in Orange Park Acres to 11, serving up to 66 children. At a cost of more than \$1,000 per child, per day, 11 homes could generate revenue of about \$2 million per month. A typical stay runs 60 to 90 days.

The company would not comment on program costs beyond saying that “our fees are covered by insurance and families need only pay their co-pays or deductibles. The average out-of-pocket cost for each family is around just \$3,500.”

Neighbors say Newport Academy is clearly a business, and businesses aren’t supposed to operate in residential neighborhoods. The company’s deep pockets mean it can outbid others trying to buy homes in Orange Park Acres. They fear their community’s character as well as for the children’s safety.

Safety

Children’s safety is Newport Academy’s first concern, Procopio said.

Teens are supervised by staff at all times, he said. Workers use “eyes on” supervision — always keeping kids in their line-of-sight. He added that the company’s staff-to-resident ratio of 4-to-1 exceeds industry standards, and while Newport Academy is not a lock-down psychiatric facility, all exits are electronically monitored and alarmed.

California does not closely monitor adult addiction treatment centers. But because Newport Academy serves children, it must be licensed by another branch of government — the state Department of Social Services — as a children’s group home. And that means more oversight.

[Records from the DSS](#) show that state analysts have visited Newport Academy homes in Orange Park Acres dozens of times over the past three years. Most visits were for pre- and post-licensing inspections, case management and annual evaluations. A handful of citations were issued for issues such as carpets and walls that needed cleaning, and homes were told to report interactions with local law enforcement to DSS in a timely manner.

Several complaints related to Newport Academy were logged with DSS as well. One sprang from a wrongful termination lawsuit filed against the company in 2013, asserting that a male employee was let go for misconduct with a female “student/patient.”

Last June – some six years after the alleged incident – DSS received a complaint that “facility staff had an inappropriate relationship with resident.” “Based on all confidential interviews, the allegation may have occurred, however not supported or proven by evidence. Therefore, the allegation is unsubstantiated at this time,” said the state’s investigation.

The two recent reports of lewd acts against minors, in 2017 and 2018, are due to the Academy’s status as a mandated reporter, meaning it must alert law enforcement when residents say they were abused in their past, Procopio said in his statement. Orange police said that the 2017 incident involved inappropriate texts to a teenage girl from a man in Florida, while the 2018 call involved two minor boys, one arrested for inappropriate touching of the other, said Sgt. Phil McMullin.

One complaint substantiated by state analysts was “children are not wearing shoes in cold weather.” A barefoot runaway was reported in January and investigated by the state 11 months later. Children at Newport Academy are not allowed to wear shoes for the first 72 hours of admission, the report said, apparently to discourage runaway attempts.

Good neighbors?

Procopio, Newport Academy’s CEO, said the company is committed to being a good neighbor and providing residents with open lines of communication directly to its leadership team.

It stresses social responsibility and the importance of giving back, routinely participating in community service projects, raising money and donating food and time to local organizations. “We take all feedback and input seriously and are grateful to be part of such a wonderful, caring community,” he said in his statement.

Neighbors say it’s not enough. But a [raft of new rules and regulations](#) directed at addiction treatment and sober living centers, adopted by the county in September and aiming to protect single-family neighborhoods, holds no sway here.

“Newport Academy deals with juveniles, which brings a whole different level of privacy and anonymity,” said Orange County Supervisor Don Wagner. “The ordinance we passed doesn’t apply.”

The safety concerns about teen runaways are troubling, he said.

“We can’t lock these kids up,” Wagner said. “They’re not institutionalized. How do you stop the runaways and still respect their freedom to the extent we possibly can?”

It’s a truly tough one, said Orange city Mayor Mark Murphy. Local officials’ hands are tied by state and federal laws.

“We do what we can do — respond to the calls and do our best to make sure the individuals running these places are holding up their end of the bargain,” Murphy said. “Everyone agrees that (rehab) services need to be available. However, I disagree with the areas in which it’s deemed acceptable.”