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'In a glass box': Clarke School for the Deaf alumni detail decades of abuse

Kim LaRocque, a former student at the Clarke School for the Deaf, seen here at age 9. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech in Northampton. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL

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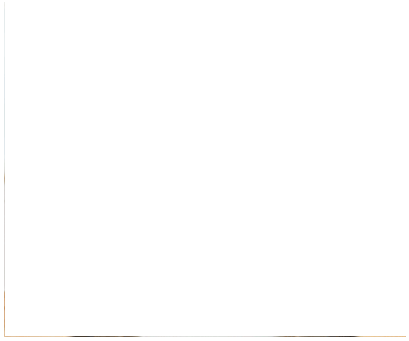
Brent Borden had just arrived at the Clarke School for the Deaf in 1963 when a housemother slapped him and knocked him into a dresser. He was 5.

She had said something about clothes, but Borden wasn't good at lip-reading and didn't understand.

"I would look at her in confusion, and then she would smack me," he said. "I would wipe my eyes, and she would smack me again and again and again ... It was almost like she was a boxer in a boxing ring."

Borden, now an American Sign Language teacher at the college level in Ohio, says the nine years he spent at Clarke left him with post-traumatic stress disorder. He's one of 16 people who spoke to the Gazette about the abuse they say they faced at Clarke when they were students during the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

Staff banishing a 5-year-old to a dark basement with no explanation. Whipping 7-year-olds with a belt. Beating students' hands with brushes and rulers if they used sign language or gestured. Punching and then strangling a 16-year-old on a pingpong table.



These are some of the accounts of long-ago students of Clarke, now grown up, who are speaking out about the abuse they faced at the school decades ago.

These children left their homes for a boarding school that insisted they learn to lip-read and speak when they could have learned American Sign Language, or ASL.

Families sent their deaf children to Clarke, a world-famous school known for its philosophy of oralism, a pedagogy in deaf education that taught oral speech and lip-reading instead of sign language. And the school often enforced that philosophy with cruelty, some alumni say.

"I was afraid to ever talk — I was afraid of the punishments," said Kim LaRocque, now 57, who described being left in that dark basement.

It was "a cycle of intimidation, oppression, control, corporal punishment. It was a pattern in the school," said Bernie Brown, now 72, who described being strangled on that pingpong table. "Very intimidating, very depressing ... They were terrible times."

They were terrible times for those who experienced abuse at Clarke, but those years also bonded the students who went there. Many students started at 5 and stayed until 16. They formed friendships and developed crushes (though kissing was prohibited), they gestured behind teachers' backs. And they supported each other through harsh punishments.

"We grew up together," said Borden, who referred to his former classmates as his "brothers and sisters."

And those bonds continue today, as alumni grapple with the traumatic experiences they say they endured at Clarke.

These are stories they are now making public for the first time.

In April, the school released a third-party investigation it had commissioned into alumni allegations of past abuse at the school, which was residential at the time. Among the findings in the law firm Debevoise & Plimpton's report was a culture of physical punishment at the school, including "constant and extreme corporal punishment" by former teacher Mary Numbers and inaction on the part of then-president George Pratt. In addition, investigators received nine reports of sexual misconduct or abuse by Numbers' brother Fred Numbers. Mary Numbers died in 1979, and Fred Numbers died in 1982.

"The victims of this abuse would have been young children, approximately eleven years old or younger. Five of the individuals who reported this noted that the sexual abuse occurred in the classroom," according to the report. "Those individuals who were interviewed and reported this molestation or sexual misconduct did not experience or witness the abuse. While investigators were unable to speak with a victim of the abuse, based on other findings, investigators found these reports credible."

Alumni who spoke to the Gazette say that the report only begins to tell the full story. Of the 16 who spoke — all using video phone and ASL interpreters — 12 alumni decided to go on the record after the Gazette reported on Clarke's independent investigation.

Clarke's residential school on Round Hill Road closed in 2012. In 2017, the school marked its 150th anniversary, and today, Clarke has day schools located in Northampton, Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Jacksonville, Florida. The school's goal, as it was decades ago, is to mainstream students into neighborhood schools. In Northampton, for instance,

Clarke operates a K-8 program inside Leeds Elementary School. The organization also offers early childhood programs and services for preschoolers.

Doug Scott, Clarke's CEO, and Mary Ellen Nevins, the board member who led the school's special committee that launched the independent investigation, said they are troubled by allegations of past abuse, and that the school has taken the allegations seriously by investing time and money into investigating them. Acknowledging that past, they emphasized that abuse does not happen at the school anymore. Nevins and Scott said they could not comment on any particular allegation, both for reasons of privacy and because they left the investigation to the third-party law firm. In a letter to alumni accompanying the law firm's report, Clarke trustees wrote that they were "deeply upset" by what the investigation found.

Meanwhile, Clarke has taken the step of creating a "limited fund" to provide financial support — drawn from the school's endowment — for medical and mental health treatment for alumni who were victims of abuse.

The announcement of that fund came on Nov. 8, eight days after the Gazette had contacted Scott to set up an interview to discuss the allegations of abuse. The independent investigation was released more than half a year prior, on April 30.

When asked whether the fund was created in response to learning of the Gazette's article, Nevins said that it was not.

"The fund was established after some long and ongoing conversations about how we would do it, what would be fair, how we would roll this out," Nevins said.

"There was absolutely no intention of sweeping things under the rug," Scott said.

'A prison without gates'

In 1965, the Vietnam War was escalating, Alabama state troopers viciously beat civil rights protesters in Selma and Muhammad Ali stunned the world by knocking out Sonny Liston in the first round. The same year, LaRocque, who is from Lee, began school at Clarke, which was a world unto itself — and one that could feel very isolating.

"We didn't know about Martin Luther King being assassinated ... We didn't know what was going on with the civil rights movement and all of that," LaRocque said.

Outside Clarke's walls, teens donned bell-bottom jeans. But inside, the school had a strict dress code; girls weren't allowed to wear pants until 1971, said LaRocque: "I think the school, they wanted us to be robots."

One Class of '57 graduate wouldn't even call it a school. "I call it a prison without gates," said Richard McElwain, originally from Sudbury. He said that as a punishment, he was once locked in a closet for an entire two weeks, fed white bread and milk and allowed to leave only to attend classes and to sleep. "They psychologically manipulated children," McElwain said. "They should be put in jail for everything that happened."

McElwain, now 78, is the oldest of the alumni who spoke to the Gazette. Today, they range from their 50s to 70s and are scattered across the country. Some are educators, teaching ASL and other subjects. Several have become committed advocates for deaf and hard-of-hearing people in their communities.

In separate interviews, over the course of six months, the alumni described enduring everything from physical punishment and violence to emotional abuse and language deprivation at Clarke.

Bernie Brown, who is originally from Springfield, recalled one teacher putting a thumbtack on a student's tongue to teach him a "K" sound. "He did not know that his tongue should 'rest' at the bottom (of his mouth), so the teacher used the thumbtack to 'threaten' him into putting his tongue flat at the bottom," Brown wrote in an email, adding that while the teacher was "successful," the student was "terrified."

Betsey Kaplan, a 1964 Clarke graduate from Northborough, said Mary Numbers — the former teacher whose "constant and extreme corporal punishment" from the 1940s to the 1960s was a large focus of the third-party investigation — forced her, a Jewish student, to attend church and once threw away a letter informing Kaplan that her grandfather had died before she ever read it.

Investigators from the independent firm hired by Clarke found that Numbers' physical and emotional abuse of students "was a source of suffering for many alumni." The report gives several examples of that abuse. Alumni recalled Numbers squeezing a student's nose so hard that it bled, slapping students' hands with a hairbrush, "paddling" students in front of their classmates, demeaning "less advantaged" children and telling one child she would never see her parents again if she were late to church.

After Numbers' death, the school kept memorials to her on campus until early in the tenure of William Corwin, the school's president from 2007 to 2016. Corwin removed displayed copies of a history of Clarke written by Numbers, titled "My Words Fell on Deaf Ears," and a plaque that alumni had "routinely removed in protest."

In interviews with the Gazette, many alumni described disturbing encounters they experienced or witnessed in Clarke's residential dorms.

Dan McClintock, now 53, was at Clarke until 1973, when he was 8 years old. He said a housefather once whipped young boys in his dorm with a belt and made them run and crawl on the floor in punishment, McClintock said.

"And we were just 7 years old at the time, and he's ordering us to do these military-style exercises, almost like hazing if you think about it," McClintock said.

Sheila Griffin Grady, who left the school early in 1971 at age 12, said that when she was at Clarke, housemothers often slapped students and would watch girls in the shower. Clarke's third-party investigation found that "there was a lack of boundaries set in the dorms regarding how adults were to interact with students resulting in fewer protections for students."

"Investigators also received several reports of houseparents and teachers who lived in the dorms acting inappropriately with students by bathing them (including touching their privates while doing so in some instances), and looking at them naked," the report says, adding that certain practical "limitations" prevented investigators from verifying the accounts.

'They took awaymy language'

There was also a lack of communication.

Clarke was the first oralist school in the country and played a leading role in promoting oralism as it rose to prominence beginning in the later half of the 19th century. Historically, residential schools for the deaf taught in sign language, written English or fingerspelling, in which letters are individually spelled out by fingers to form words. But oralism came with a campaign to eliminate sign language and other methods that combined signing and oral speech.

By the 1920s, most deaf students in America were taught by the oral method, and the vast majority of deaf teachers had been replaced with hearing teachers. The method fell out of favor partly as a result of the civil rights era and as the signing Deaf community — with a capital "D" to signify the larger culture — pushed back against the silencing of their culture and language, ASL.

Many of the alumni said the physical punishment they faced was often tied to the school's oralist pedagogy. Staff prohibited students from signing or even gesticulating, and the alumni who spoke to the Gazette said that Clarke teachers beat their hands if they saw the students using them. While some are glad they learned speech and lip-reading, many alumni are now resentful of the oral method — and of the fact that they were denied ASL.

"They even lied to my mother and father, saying that American Sign Language will make your children abnormal," LaRocque said. "They gave my parents one option."

"They took away my language — that was my language," said John Monahan, a 1978 graduate, originally from Dorchester. "It limited me. I had to speak, I had to be oral. That's not who I am ... I wanted to use my hands to speak."

Mary Pat Graham-Kelly left the school in 1974 with low self-esteem, and later realized that Clarke's oralist philosophy had held her back academically, she said. She feels the school should have taught both ASL and English.

"There were so many hours and hours of talking and talking and lip-reading and lip-reading," she said. "I felt like they were psychologically abusing us."

Once, Kim LaRocque said, she was forced to bite a bar of soap for more than an hour after a misunderstanding over a word.

Sheila Griffin Grady said teachers hit, pinched and humiliated her and other students when they gestured or mispronounced words. They also forced deaf students to sing and told them that their hard-of-hearing classmates could sing better, she said: "We felt belittled."

Grady believes the abuse was meant to deprive deaf students of their "natural, native first language" — ASL — and said that students "lived on eggshells," developing anxiety attacks, constipation, depression and other conditions that they could not fully articulate in English.

"My vocabulary was very limited ... in our world, my classmates and I, we were kind of in a glass box," Grady said. "We could see everything, but we couldn't communicate — we couldn't get through that glass to connect with people."

Parental reaction

Borden, the child whom a housemother smacked repeatedly when he first arrived to Clarke, yearned to go back to his parents' home in Ohio. Standing in line outside the dorm on the Round Hill Road campus one day, he saw the top of the nearby mountains. He remembers the feeling of despair, wanting to run away.

"But who can run away from Massachusetts to Ohio?" he said. He only got to go home four times a year — Christmas, Thanksgiving, spring break and summer. Borden, now 61, said he felt immense relief when he left Clarke at age 14.

Some alumni said that when they told their family about the culture of punishment at the school, their parents were upset and voiced their anger directly to school administrators. Other alumni didn't feel they had the words at the time to adequately explain what they experienced — and still others tried but felt powerless to change the culture.

Richard McElwain said he reported his abuse — to school administrators, to his parents — and no one listened. Today, the internet has created the possibility for victims to share their stories, he said, but in those "dark ages," no such possibility existed.

"Many of us complained to our parents," he said, "but our parents didn't believe us."

Many of those same parents of Clarke students were hearing, though some alumni had deaf parents who themselves had graduated from Clarke. Gordon Bergan, for example, said his parents were loyal to Clarke after graduating from the school.

"The other kids really didn't have much communication with their parents at home," Bergan said.

Brown also said his parents, who were deaf Clarke graduates, knew of the harsh treatment but encouraged their son to finish his education at Clarke, which they considered a top-notch school.

"They told me to be patient, time and time again," he said, recalling how he gained strength from them when he would visit home on the weekends. But his parents were afraid of some staff members, including Numbers, he wrote in a follow-up email: "They knew all about the physical abuses at the school but were unable to 'speak up' because they didn't want to make it worse for themselves and me, too."

Finding their identity

At 24, a decade after he had left the school, Brent Borden returned for a Clarke reunion and noticed something different — many of his former classmates were signing with one another. At the time, Borden still didn't know ASL.

"That's how I started to fall in love with the language," he said. "That was the first day of the rest of my life, I would say."

Borden went on to become fluent in ASL, and now he has taught the language at the collegiate level for decades in his home state of Ohio.

Many alumni spoke about the way Clarke's oralist philosophy deprived them of their culture growing up and left them struggling with their identities.

Now a full-time advocate for deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Texas, Sheila Griffin Grady said ASL is a central component in the larger Deaf culture that many of the Clarke alumni said they were kept from. That culture is a shared set of beliefs, history and practices that those in the Deaf community — who view deafness as a difference in human experience and not as a medical defect to be "fixed" or "cured" — take pride in.

"I believe I have my identity back, thanks to my employer, which is a deaf-run agency with a deaf-run interpreting department, so I feel very equal here," Grady wrote in an email. "I can be myself and am damn good at my job as an advocate."

Eric Albro, a 1974 graduate, said he felt Clarke prepared him well to be mainstreamed into Gateway Regional High School, in Huntington, where he developed close friends and played on the basketball team.

Albro went on to attend the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, in Rochester, New York, where he was shocked to see so many students signing. He began to sign and started to make friends at school. But as he signed more and more, he said his speech became "weaker," and he began to feel caught between the hearing and deaf worlds. His friends from high school started to have trouble understanding him, but he also didn't yet have the sign-language skills to speak easily with his new college friends. It was a depressing time, he said.

"When I was with my hearing friends, I thought they would laugh at me," he said. "And when I was with my deaf friends, I thought they would laugh at me."

Grady said the school didn't prepare students for life after Clarke. Often, she said, deaf students practiced speech with their teachers only. Outside Clarke's campus, they mostly interacted with family or others they already knew.

"They never trained us how to interact with 'hearing people' in our 'hearing' society," Grady wrote in an email. "Nor did they train us how to accommodate ourselves when people could not understand us, or avoided eye contact with us or treated us like a second-class citizen."

'A different day' at Clarke

For many, the trauma of their time at Clarke has stayed with them long after leaving the school. As bad as those memories are for alumni, the pain is compounded for those who are not satisfied with Clarke's response, despite the independent report and accompanying apology released by school trustees. The alumni who spoke to the Gazette universally said the report was inadequate, overlooking the broader scope of the alleged physical and psychological abuse that students endured at the school.

Some criticized the fact that the April report was not released outside the school community. The reason, Clarke officials said, was that they wanted to respect the privacy of alumni.

"We understand it could have caused pain for these folks," said Scott, the school's CEO. "If they chose to make this public, that was their call, but we felt it wasn't our place to do that."

The April report found that George Pratt, the school's president from 1950 to 1981, was good friends with Mary Numbers, knew of her corporal punishment and did nothing to curb the misconduct. Also according to the report, Pratt's successor, Dennis Gjerdingen, heard reports about Mary and Fred Numbers but did not investigate because he thought those with relevant knowledge were dead.

Pratt died in 1998. The Gazette's attempts to reach Gjerdingen were unsuccessful.

It was not until William Corwin took over as president in 2007 that the school began to take steps to address past abuses. However, Corwin did not initiate an investigation, partly because the allegations against Mary Numbers were "basically a matter of general knowledge," Corwin said.

"This was not something the school was denying," Corwin said. "It was an accepted fact that she had mistreated students."

Still, some Clarke alumni are unhappy with the school's handling of the stories that have come to light. Brown, who graduated in 1963 and is now retired and living in Florida, said he thinks Clarke should do better in righting its past wrongs.

"They should have had a paragraph of recommendations — actions that the school should take," Brown said of the April report. "And there was absolutely nothing."

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