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<http://rockcenter.msnbc.msn.com/news/2012/03/13/10669162-foreign-exchange-students-sexually-abused-in-program-overseen-by-state-department>

By Anna Schechter

Rock Center

Dozens of high school foreign exchange students have been raped, sexually abused, or harassed by American host parents in towns and cities across the country, an NBC News investigation has found.

In one of the most egregious cases, at least four exchange students were sexually abused over the course of two years by the same host father, even after the first victim sounded alarms.

"He said 'this is American culture,' and I should get used to it," Christopher Herbon of Germany told NBC News in an exclusive interview to be broadcast Wednesday night on Rock Center.

The organization that placed them with the host father has been accused of orchestrating a cover-up to protect its reputation over the safety of the students.

Every year more than 25,000 teens from around the world come to America as part of a program overseen by the State Department that is hailed as an integral part of U.S. diplomacy.

Most of those teens have a great experience and cases of sexual abuse are rare. But NBC News' investigation found two major flaws in the system. A lack of oversight can allow sexual predators to take advantage of the program. And when sexual abuse does happen, there is evidence that the students are sent back to their home countries with little or no support from the exchange organizations or the State Department.

There are more than 80 organizations that pay a fee to get the State Department's stamp of approval as a "designated sponsor organization." That distinction allows the organizations to place the students with host families for one academic year. Each organization in turn must follow regulations designed to protect the students from harm.

The host families do not receive any compensation, but the students' parents can pay more than \$10,000 for their child's year abroad. The largest organizations for which there are records take in an average of seven million dollars each year, according to an NBC News review of their Internal Revenue Service filings.

The more students they place, the more revenues for the organizations, and critics say the financial incentives create an environment ripe for abuse.

"These sponsoring agencies make a lot of money for each of these kids. The profit margin is very big, and they're motivated to get them into some house, somewhere, without the proper vetting. So it's a perfect storm. It's sort of abuse waiting to happen," said attorney Irwin Zalkin, who along with attorney Andrea Leavitt represented Herbon and three other exchange students sexually abused by a host father and local coordinator for one of the organizations.

GUILLAUME'S STORY

In August 2003, the year before Herbon came to the U.S. as an exchange student, 18-year-old Guillaume Le Mayeur of Belgium was excitedly packing for his American adventure.

Le Mayeur's parents paid the equivalent of \$10,200 for their son's year abroad. The money went to Los Angeles-based Educational Resource Development Trust, ERDT, and its sister organization in Belgium, World Education Program, WEP.

Le Mayeur was hoping to live in New York or Los Angeles, but instead ERDT placed him in run-down trailer in rural Arkansas. His host father was 34-year old Doyle Meyer.

Meyer, his then wife Gigi, and a former exchange student were sharing the cramped trailer when Le Mayeur moved in.

"When I first came there, I [had] a little bit of disappointment about the place ... and I said to myself, 'Well, you're here now. You just have to accommodate yourself and....make the best of it and take it,'" Le Mayeur said in an exclusive interview with NBC News' Rock Center.

Le Mayeur said within a month of his arrival, Meyer started talking about sex, touching and hugging him, and unsuccessfully trying to get him to sleep in his bed with him.

"He would hug me, well, trying to hug me a lot. He would take my hands and he would ask me to lie on his chest when he was watching TV," he said.

He said Meyer bought alcohol and marijuana for other exchange students living nearby, showed them pornographic films, encouraged them to show him their genitals and once measured a male student's anatomy with his bare hand.

On an ERDT-sponsored trip to Washington, D.C., Le Mayeur said Meyer allowed students to videotape two teens having sex, and watched the tape with them.

The students slept two to a bed in a local motel, and Le Mayeur said he was assigned to sleep in the same bed as Meyer, who tried to massage his stomach and touch his genitals. Le Mayeur said he jumped out of the bed.

Once back in Arkansas, Le Mayeur said he tried to report the molestation and Meyer's irresponsible behavior to his local coordinator, Pat Whitfield. He said he set a time to meet with Whitfield, but she called Meyer and invited him to sit in on the meeting.

"So I couldn't say anything I wanted [to say]. But they were like best friends and [Meyer] went to talk to her first," said Le Mayeur.

Le Mayeur said Meyer became intent on having him expelled from the program in order to silence him. He said Meyer reported him to ERDT executives for driving a car (against the program's rules) and smoking marijuana, both of which Le Mayeur admits.

ERDT did expel Le Mayeur. Back home in Belgium, ashamed and shunned by his own family for being kicked out, he found the courage to write an email to ERDT staff detailing what happened to him and other students and warning them that something must be done to protect other students.

"I think that something must be done to stop that as fast as it is possible...because [one] day or another something bad is going to happen," Le Mayeur wrote in the email.

ERDT never reported Le Mayeur's allegations to state authorities or the State Department. Instead the organization launched its own investigation led by staff who later admitted in a 2010 deposition that they had no experience with an investigation of alleged abuse.

"SWEPT UNDER THE RUG"

Plaintiff attorney Andrea Leavitt said ERDT circled the wagons, protecting the reputation of the organization over the safety of the students for whom the organization was responsible.

"There are no disclosures to parents for the children coming in. There are no disclosures to the kids. There are no warnings. Everything is swept under the rug, concealed. Absolutely every parent's nightmare," Leavitt said. "They begin to circle the wagons. And rather than protect the vulnerable kid, they start to protect themselves from liability and exposure," she said.

ERDT executive Kelli Jones wrote to her staff asking for anything "positive" they knew about Doyle Meyer as she was preparing a report for the Belgian exchange company, WEP.

In August of 2004, two months after Le Mayeur sent his email, Jones wrote to her staff saying that Meyer should know that ERDT "went to a lot of work, time, and energy to clear his name and support his good reputation." She went on to disparage Le Mayeur, writing, "As far as I'm concerned it may not be over with yet. [Le Mayeur] may rear his ugly head again."

ERDT decided Meyer should not be a host father the following year, but would remain working as a coordinator, whose job it is to supervise students.

According to fellow coordinator Theresa Benevides and host father David Krenn, Meyer was known as a "high placer," meaning he was able to find an above-average number of families to host students.

"He placed almost 20 kids. He was very valuable to ERDT because he brought in so much money," Benevides said.

A SECOND ROUND OF ABUSE

During the fall of 2004, Meyer served as 16-year old Christopher Herbon's coordinator. Herbon said he was unhappy living with an unfriendly elderly couple with no children, isolated in a remote area. He told this to Meyer, and in early 2005 Meyer arranged for the teenager to move in with him. By this time, Meyer had separated from his wife and was living with another current exchange student on the outskirts of Little Rock.

Herbon said Meyer began to give him alcohol and Oxycontin shortly after he arrived. He said Meyer would press him to show him his genitals once he was intoxicated, and even gave him male enhancement pills.

"I was afraid that if I wouldn't make him happy, he would kick me out, and that I would be sent home. I didn't want to disappoint my parents. I was very afraid that he would send me home because my parents would be very disappointed," he said.

In addition to Herbon, Meyer was sexually abusing other exchange students that academic year. When one of them finally told Benevides, she alerted the police and Meyer was arrested in May, 2005.

"KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT"

When word got out about the arrest, Benevides said ERDT executives flew to Arkansas and told the local coordinators not to speak about the abuse. She said at a meeting convened in Arkansas, Jones told her, "Keep your mouth shut."

Meyer pleaded guilty to first degree sexual assault and served four of a six year sentence. When NBC News reached him by phone at his mother's Arkansas chicken farm, he refused to comment on this story, saying that his parole was almost up and he wanted to move on with his life.

In 2010, attorneys Zalkin and Leavitt filed a civil suit against ERDT on behalf of Le Mayeur, Herbon, and two other students. ERDT settled the case for an undisclosed amount without admitting liability.

Kelli Jones, who has since been promoted to President of ERDT, declined to comment on this story. But in a 2010 deposition, she told Leavitt that she did not consider Le Mayeur's account of Meyer's behavior to be sexual abuse, but rather "immature idiotic boy behavior."

The ERDT regional coordinator who handled the investigation is still in the same job. Whitfield, who was Meyer's friend and fellow coordinator, was fired. She is now working for another exchange organization hosting and placing students in Arkansas. Whitfield declined to comment on this story.

STATE DEPARTMENT DEFENDS THE PROGRAM

When asked why ERDT is still operational after a case like this, State Department spokesperson Toria Nuland said that ERDT was one of the organizations that helped the Department draft new regulations in recent years to better protect exchange students from abuse.

"They have been complying as we've strengthened the regulations with the improved standards, which is why we've kept them on our rolls. They themselves were horrified and victimized by this situation," Nuland said.

In 2009 the State Department asked the Inspector General to investigate Youth Exchange Programs following a series of reports of mistreatment of exchange students.

The Inspector General's scathing report found "insufficient oversight of the youth exchange programs at all levels." It said communication among staff "borders on unprofessional," there was a "lack of human and financial resources" in the office running the programs, and an "erroneous assumption" that the exchange organizations monitor themselves.

Nuland said that as a result, the Department increased staff overseeing the program, dropped a number of organizations from the list of designated sponsors, and implemented new regulations to more thoroughly check out host families.

In addition, Nuland said that before exchange students come to America, they now receive a package of information about their rights, and what they should do if they encounter any problems in the U.S. or problems with the host family.

"We are strengthening the checks on the front end, staying with the kids so intensely during the program," she said.

The State Department did not have a central log of complaints until the 2009-2010 school year, but issued NBC News its data from the 2010-2011 year that showed sexual abuse or harassment was reported by less than one percent of the total number of high school students who spend a year at an American high school. They said that percentage includes any and all harassment, even if it did not involve a host parent.

"The vast majority of high school foreign exchange students have an enormously gratifying, rich, fantastic American experience that lasts with them for a lifetime," Nuland said.

But problems in the program persist, and ERDT is not the only organization involved. Rock Center's investigation found fourteen different organizations where students had alleged being sexually abused or harassed by a host parent. Several of the organizations have faced lawsuits for placing students in harm's way.

Wednesday's broadcast will include an interview with a student who says he was sexually abused by his host father this past Christmas.

Nuland said that from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's point of view even one child abused under these programs is one child too many.

"Our standard has to be zero tolerance. So to the degree that which we still have cases reported we are not there yet. Are the reforms that we've put in place sufficient? I think we need to watch that over the next couple of months and see where it goes. But we are absolutely committed to continuing to tighten these regulations and improve this program until we get to zero."

Editor's Note: Kate Snow's full report, Culture Shock, airs Wednesday, Mar. 14 at 10 pm/9 c on Rock Center with Brian Williams.

Caitlin Klevorick
Senior Advisor to the Counselor and Chief of Staff
U.S. Department of State
KlevorickCB@state.gov
202.341.8913
@caitlinbk