

## Nearly \$52M settlement for former students of Miracle Meadows

From Staff Reports

CHARLESTON — Twenty-nine former students at the Miracle Meadows School in Salem, who were child victims of serious sexual and physical abuse, settled their claims for a total of \$51.9 million following years of litigation against the school, according to Forbes Law Offices PLLC.

The total settlement amount is believed to be a record for such cases in the state and was reached with the various defendants and finalized Oct. 27, the law firm's news release said.

The 29 former children were alleged to have suffered mental, sexual and physical abuse by the adults who ran the Christian boarding school in Harrison County over a period of decades, according to the news release.

The former students alleged that they suffered shocking abuse that included being chained and shackled to beds, kept in isolation rooms for weeks and months at a time, sexually assaulted, starved, forced to perform manual labor and routinely beaten, according to the news release.

The case was settled on behalf of the former students by Charleston attorneys Jesse Forbes of Forbes Law Offices PLLC and Scott Long of Hendrickson & Long, PLLC; along with Brian Kent and Guy D'Andrea of Laffey, Bucci & Kent LLP in Philadelphia.

"The abuse suffered by these children would shock the conscience of any West Virginian," said their attorney, Jesse Forbes. "They were stripped naked, handcuffed, sexually abused and kept in a 5-by-8-foot room with a coffee can for a toilet. This is the stuff straight from a horror movie."

Miracle Meadows School was founded in 1987, and it was advertised as a Christian boarding school for boys and girls 6 to 17 years of age "who are experiencing difficulty relating in a positive way to family, school, church or community or are experiencing dishonesty, school failure, trouble with the law, spiritual disinterest, poor social skills, adoption issues, and other behavior that is harmful to them and others," according to the lawsuits.

Although authorities and law enforcement attempted to investigate Miracle Meadows for years, it became difficult to see those investigations reach a conclusion as the alleged perpetrators were often brought to the school on work visas and would be sent back to their home countries before authorities could question them any time a complaint was made.

"I have spent years as a guardian ad litem for abused children in this state, and I have never seen anything like this," Forbes said. "These children were tortured in ways that people couldn't even dream about in their worst nightmares, and the fact that it continued over so many decades is truly shocking."

Longtime Charleston attorney and mediator Scott Long, who also represented the plaintiffs, described the case as complex from a standpoint of trying to obtain an appropriate level of compensation for the children.

"This settlement will finally bring justice to these innocent children, now adults, and hopefully allow them



Staff file photo by Matt Harvey

**The Miracle Meadows School as it appeared during the August 2014 raid by authorities that led to it being shuttered. The school and several former students who were alleged to have suffered abuse have reached a more than \$50 million settlement.**



Staff file photo by Matt Harvey

**Miracle Meadows Director Susan Gayle Clark is remanded into custody at her 2016 sentencing hearing.**

to begin to heal," Long said. "The horrific abuse has come to an end but without setting aside money to provide these former children the healing services they desperately need their abuse would continue."

The Miracle Meadows School in Salem was shut down by authorities in 2014 due to allegations of physical and sexual abuse and serious neglect of students in the school. The school's director, Susan Gayle Clark, was convicted of child neglect and failing to report in Harrison County and sentenced to 6 months in jail and 5 years of probation. The Harrison County Sheriff's Office uncovered multiple allegations of sex abuse and physical assault at the school.

The school, founded by Clark and



Staff file photo by Matt Harvey

**Twenty-nine former students at the Miracle Meadows School were alleged to have suffered mental, sexual and physical abuse by the adults who ran the facility.**



Staff file photo by Matt Harvey

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her husband, had operated as a boarding school targeting at-risk youth, including those with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders.

The case was styled as a consolidated action in L.B vs. Miracle Meadows School, et al. Civil Action No. 17-C-146 and was filed in the Circuit Court

of Kanawha County. The plaintiffs were represented by Charleston attorneys Jesse Forbes of Forbes Law Offices, PLLC; Scott Long, Hendrickson & Long, PLLC; and Brian Kent and Guy D'Andrea of Laffey Bucci & Kent, LLP in Philadelphia.