

School closes after cult allegations

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BROCKVILLE, Ontario — A private religious school that charged up to \$35,000 a year for tuition has abruptly closed its doors amid allegations of sexual improprieties and cult practices.

Citing rising costs and a drop in enrollment, officials at Grenville Christian College, which sits on the edge of the St. Lawrence River town of Brockville, Ont., announced at the end of July it would close.

Students who attended the school over a period dating back to the 1980s paint a picture of a bizarre environment, involving so-called "light sessions" where teenagers were ordered from their beds in the middle of the night, made to sit in a dark room with a bright light shining on their face and accused repeatedly of being sinners by teachers and staff they couldn't see.

The Right Rev. Peter Mason, the retired bishop of the Anglican diocese of Ontario, which includes

Brockville, said he had heard allegations from former staff members of cult behavior at the school but had not been aware it involved students.

Students from that period have told *The Globe and Mail* they feel psychologically damaged by their time at the school, which accepted children from the age of 6.

Andrew Hale-Byrne, a British civil servant who graduated from the school in the 1990s, said former students from the past 30 years have begun sharing their experiences at Grenville after one of their number created a message board on an Internet site devoted to cults.

Hale-Byrne told of being summoned at night to the school chapel and being made to endure an experience that he described as an exorcism, a liturgy for casting out of demons. Hale-Byrne, who was 16 at the time, said he felt afraid and isolated.

"For 10, 12 years, I had recurring nightmares about Grenville.

Present and former staff interviewed by *The Globe and Mail* acknowledged being

aware of the allegations — headmaster Rev. Gordon Mintz called them "disconcerting" — but said they were without foundation.

Rev. Mintz, an Anglican priest, said the school had a "regimented schedule. We pushed people to excellence."

The message board links Grenville — which counts two former Ontario lieutenant-governors, a senator and a former Canadian high commissioner to the United Kingdom among its "patrons" — to a titular Anglican group known as the Community of Jesus in Massachusetts, which has been labelled a mind-control cult in the U.S. media.

The community's founders, Mother Cay Andersen and Mother Judy Sorensen, were invited to Grenville in 1973 ("to show us God's prayerful way of doing things," according to long-time headmaster Rev. Charles Farnsworth) and lived there for several months.

For years afterward, the community sent its children, especially those considered rebellious, to Grenville.

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