

*The following video contains highly detailed graphic and audible depictions of child abuse and emotional torture.
Viewer discretion is strongly advised.*

"Former student Matt Hoffman, who boarded at Elan between 1974 and 1976, had nothing good to say about the program Wednesday, calling the campus a "sadistic, brutal, violent, soul-eating hellhole."

– Lewiston Sun Journal, March 24th, 2011.

A New Life

[FEBRUARY, 1978]

Thursday.

Wayne Kernochan was stuck at home amidst one of the longest winters in years. He was what his parents believed to be a problem child – experiencing nightmares, arguing with his 7 siblings, and getting in trouble at school. His parents method of reprimand – wasn't the best. Having gone on record to state that his father beats him with hockey sticks – it was undeniable that their humble abode in suburban Connecticut was less of a place of refuge for him, and more of a cell of torment.

The phone rings in the kitchen – and his mom answers. It's from a school up north called Elan. The man on the phone says he should come right away, and that they'll have a private jet waiting for him at Danbury Airport. She tells Wayne not to worry, and that it's more of an outdoor camp-type thing that'll make him better. According to the flyers she read, it was proven with a 95% success rate, and their alumni were all leaving as better people than when they first arrived there. "*Counselors, psychiatrists, activities, friends*", Elan had it all, he was told, and so Wayne packed up his stuff that night, eager, sure. Nervous, yes. But absolutely awaiting the things to come.

-eye close then plane noise-

[PORTLAND, MAINE]

The plane touches down in Portland, Maine. Two men greet him.

After embarking for the school 30 minutes north in Poland, his escorts inquire on why he's attending – *drugs?* Nope. *Court order?* No. *So why the hell are you going?*, they joke. And then things get quiet. It was at this moment when Wayne began to question whether he was going to the place he thought he was. Something didn't seem right, but he was willing to give it the benefit of the doubt.

The two pull off a back, wooded road into a clearing. "*Looks like a camp*", he thinks. However when he exits the vehicle, he isn't greeted with the silent serenity of nature, but instead – the screaming:

-play screams with reverb over woods-

[Welcome to Elan: The Cult in a Boarding School]

-play Children of Darkness snippet to 1:10-

The Birth of a Lie

//OPENING AND LOCATION

The 1970s were an interesting time.

-show music festivals on VHS-

Across the United States, a rise in for-profit Behavior Modification facilities were in action. Now called, the Troubled Teen, or “Tough Love” industry, it seemed to be a money machine, aimed at altering and stifling troublesome behavior in adolescents. The exact data is hard to gauge, due to the widely varying nature of the names, motives, and specialties of each of these schools, but they were widespread, and only became more so throughout the 80’s.

It’s widely believed that the parental reception to the youth of the era were the catalyst for facilities like this. Given that this was the decade following the rise of the hippie subculture, authority was and had been challenged for years, resulting in a sort of “panic” among older generations.

Resultingly, in early 1970, a psychiatrist named Gerald Davidson, alongside investor David Goldberg, and a man named Joseph Ricci, would band together to form a school named *Elan*, a private co-ed behavior modification program geared from grade 8 to beyond high school. Ricci billed the facility as one that would “correct”, bad behavior by teens without punishment, while painting himself as a genuine mentor that could help make that happen.

Sitting on 33 acres of land off of No. 5 Road in Poland, Maine, Elan’s main campus was highly secluded, and a long-shot from any outside civilization. With numerous facilities in place, the school was well-equipped to handle a student body in the hundreds, and within the span of just one year, they’d eventually meet that metric.

Numerous alumni, much like Wayne, have gone on record to state that their initial, outside impression of the school was that it was like a summer camp in the Maine woods, however, upon arrival, reality would paint a different picture. Allegedly, the final minutes of the trip there were – unforgettable, with Elan being shrouded “*down a long dirt road in the middle of the wilderness*”, and “*made up of run-down trailers and buildings, giving it a frightening feeling of dread*”. Furthermore, some have stated that once they exit the vehicle expecting a lively campground, they’re, instead, faced with a sight much stranger. Some students were spotted wearing degrading signs. Some shackled in handcuffs. Some being yelled at. And, bizarrely, everyone just pretends – it’s normal.

-hyperzoom into map and into a 3D scene, at night, remake campus-

At this point, it’s been noted that some students attempt to flee. They weren’t entirely sure what the Elan School was, but it was clear to them that it wasn’t good. These escape efforts were always futile, though – as Elan regularly stationed guards around the campus to chase and subdue outliers that would attempt this. Considering how the school was marketed, touting itself as an altruistic institution genuinely concerned with helping troubled teenagers get better, it was clear from the outside that those claims were a reach.

...But just how far would they take that?

-zoom out of scene into darkness with SFX-

-loading screen: HOW DID WE GET HERE?-

//MAKING A DEAL

What most students were unaware of – was that behind their back, a deal was made on their behalf.

-boom music onto website-

With nothing but a simple signature and payment, parents could successfully sign their child's life over to Elan, which advertised itself as a positive, re-affirming center of growth. According to an excerpt from an early-2000s archive of their website, we can observe the vernacular they used to appeal to each parent:

Dear Parents:

We are very aware of how lonely and confused you must feel as you sit down to read this

If you are like the parents of most of our students, you are faced with an adolescent whose behavior is out of control, and you don't know why. A youngster who has been given everything and is throwing it away is difficult to understand, but you can see that this process is progressive. The most saddening part is knowing that your offspring is ruining his or her future. Your own pain is difficult, but your pain for your child is unbearable.

By coming to Elan, you have come to a truly different school. We cannot offer you miracles, but we can offer you hope. We know your journey to this point has been painful. We hope Elan can change its course.

On top of this, school staff were known to hand out flyers to parents while persuading them that their child *just might* be troubled. It's been noted that Joseph Ricci was somewhat of a salesman. He was charismatic, and excelled at convincing parents of the all the good that Elan could do for their children. The good that, as we'll soon find, was all a lie.

-fade-

//THE PROCESS

I'd like to let it be known that Wayne's Elan recruitment story was – on the lighter side. For most of the other students, things were handled a bit more violently.

-music onto video of plane-

Rather than a plane, school alumni have gone on record to state that they were transported by *van*. Reportedly, once your parents agree to send you off to Elan and pay the \$50,000 tuition fee, they'd designate a time and date with Elan's so-called "*Teen Escort Service*".

They wouldn't pick you up during the day, though. Instead, in the middle of the night when you're fast asleep, they would bust down your door and kidnap you. In years past, Elan's staff have stated that since the child has no say in attending, their capture hinges on the element of surprise. According to a blog named Suzuki's Thoughts, the abduction process involves "*...two men breaking into the teen's bedroom, physically subduing them, tying them up with plastic handcuffs, throwing them into a van, and then driving them to Poland, Maine where they would be handed over to the Elan School.*"

Such experiences often traumatized the teens who were abducted. For all they knew at first, they were being taken by criminals to be held for ransom, tortured, or, worse, killed. For the girls, it was even more terrifying. Some girls later recalled that they believed they were going to be raped, sexually assaulted, and murdered by their abductors.

One certainly cannot blame the kids for thinking this way. Such practices had all the hallmarks of a violent kidnapping.

This practice became notorious around the United States, eventually earning it's nickname – the “*Elan Snatch*”. If this was any indication, it was clear that morality wasn't the school's strong suit.

But – would it stop there? Or was their torment only just beginning?

-fade to loading screen, add images and Ricci quote maybe-

Destination: Elan

Day one.

-cold, isolated music-

Students would typically arrive to Elan during the early morning hours of the day. Due to the nature of their transport to the campus, they often were known to resist their escorts. It's often noted that their capture was designed this way, utilizing their escape attempt against them as a tool to convey that no matter what, they're not getting out of there. And with this, came the first steps of dehumanization – instilling the feeling that their basic rights have been robbed of them, in-turn making them feel less like a student, and more like a prisoner.

//SHOWER

This sentiment was taken even further when they're physically taken inside the school. Often, the first stop would be the dormitory showers, which served as a tool in robbing each student of their sense of individuality. Reportedly, students are thrown into them with no privacy at all, and are demanded to remove all of their clothing and valuable items. After complying, they're given what Elan calls “*No image*” clothing, which as the name implies, simply consists of a bland, colorless shirt and pants, effectively forcing them into a state of conformity.

//BIG BROTHER

Following this, each new student would be taken into a common area, where they're assigned what Elan calls a “*Big Brother*”. This, in essence, was a tenured student designated to be a guide. On paper, they were told to help their students adjust to their new life on campus, somewhat like a peer, while educating them on how great and effective the program is. In reality, though, this relationship was far from friendly. It's been reported that Big Brothers would often try to deceive their newer counterparts, enticing them to run away, or to break the rules. If the student had ever agreed or attempted to listen to this, their behavior would be reported to school staff, resulting in punishment. As we've seen in studies like the Stanford Prison Experiment, I'm sure you can see why this would be a bad idea. Often times, Big Brother figures, much like the staff, would take pleasure in exerting their superiority over the newer students. It fulfilled them in a way that was almost cult-like.

-play short snippet of Children of Darkness-

//HIERARCHY

Speaking of cults, the social hierarchy at Elan is structured in a way that heavily resembles one. At the school, students are immediately placed into two categories: Strengths – which were tenured, obedient students that were a few steps up the totem pole. And Non-strengths – the newer ones who typically resisted treatment. Strengths were allowed to talk to fellow strengths and non-strengths. Non-strengths, on the other hand, were only permitted to communicate with strengths. If a non-strength was caught communicating with a non-strength, harsh punishment would soon greet them.

-fade out, fade in images of campus-

//HOPELESSNESS

The Elan School, as we've established, thrives on the feeling of hopelessness. Throughout students tenures there, they were forbidden to contact anyone from the outside world unless they've earned the privilege through good behavior and compliance. Every single phone line from campus would run through a single switchboard located in this small trailer, and it was heavily guarded because of that. If a student were to gain the privilege of contacting their family, it's been reported that they're heavily monitored, only permitted to praise the school for all the good its done to help them during their time there. If they ever were to be caught telling the truth or revealing the atrocities that occur behind the scenes, they were quickly reprimanded, disconnected, and robbed of any future potential to use the phone lines ever again.

On top of the social manipulation involving the phones, every Elan resident was required to write what the school calls a "Guilt Letter", which, as you might expect, is an explanation of how great the Elan School is for them, all the great activities they do there, and how well they're progressing through the program. These letters would be heavily scrutinized, before being mailed out to their parents. Effectively, this tactic's goal was two-fold – to allow Elan's façade to remain in place, and to entice their parents to spend more money on their treatment, in-turn keeping them there even longer than they had ever planned to.

-play price on life snippet-

In reality, students were helpless, being abused, and in most cases, verbally tortured at the pleasure of the Elan School's staff. It was clear to students that they weren't getting away from this any time soon, and after realizing this, their minds would often pivot away from rebellion and towards compliance in hopes of powering through the program. This drove most of them to become somewhat "brainwashed", ultimately stuck in a system that will do everything it possibly can to make their escape...

-fade to black-

...Impossible.

Mid-Day

-play snippet of Elan-

As you might expect, the rules at the Elan School were – immense.

Exerting nearly totalitarian control over everything that happens, Joe Ricci's list of rules, which he calls "Guilt", was gargantuan, and needlessly meticulous. As a student at Elan, you would be expected to refrain from doing the following:

-Talking too quietly, talking too loudly, talking to someone without permission, talking to a non-strength while being a non-strength, talking too much, not talking enough, talking about outside subjects, looking at someone of the opposite gender, purposefully avoiding looking at someone of the opposite gender, being attracted to someone, looking outside, looking at the floor, having a negative body language, reacting to insults, slouching or yawning, being "sideways", reading or writing, drawing, not falling asleep, oversleeping, laughing at a joke, doing poorly in academia, feeling sleepy, speaking without permission, eating when not allowed, not eating, going outside without authorization, rolling your eyes, trying to escape campus, swearing, smiling, not smiling enough, making any physical contact, wearing any "image" clothes, having bad thoughts, voicing any sort of disapproval, and the list goes on, and on.

Clearly, these rules were not designed to be followed, causing harsh penalizations to become commonplace. One of these punishments involved writing down every Guilt infraction that you've committed on paper – no matter how mundane it is. These were called Guilt Lists, and students were required to be truthful. It was well known that if they were ever to lie, they would be caught and reprimanded accordingly.

Interestingly, also around campus were individuals designated by the school as "*Expeditors*", which were essentially tenured students with clipboards reporting any infractions that they witness while on watch. These clipboards contained carefully outlined lists that Expeditors were required to fill each day, and if they failed to or falsified any of the information on them, they, too, would be reprimanded.

-slight pause-

//PUNISHMENT

Punishment varied heavily at Elan, and not in a good way. A special group of students named "*Dealing Crews*" were tasked with degrading rule-breakers in any way they could. These often involved screaming in their faces, although, this generalization was merely the tip of the iceberg.

One example of a school punishment involved requiring a group of students to live in a dumpster for over two weeks. The Expeditor watching them was tasked with ensuring compliance and preventing any attempt to escape. If their subordinates acted out, however, the Expeditor on duty would be forced to live in the dumpster with them, while being monitored by yet another who was up to the task.

Another major tactic at Elan was humiliation. They figured that by breaking down their social barrier, forcing students into extreme embarrassment, they could drive them to a point of total compliance. Those who attempted escape were often labeled as "*Split Risks*", and their punishment for doing so was confiscation of their shoelaces, and the requirement to wear a bright yellow tee-shirt and short pink

shorts. To the school, they figured that without laces, their shoes were essentially useless, in turn preventing any ability to move any faster than a walk.

A more extreme example of a Split Risk punishment is shown with this student. Rather than a tee-shirt and shorts, though, he was forced to wear a bright pink rabbit suit with cuffs around his legs. It's unclear if this is a repeat offender, but it raises the question as to how far Elan would actually go with this tactic.

-slight pause-

Students that smiled out of place were punished by wearing dunce caps and reduced to work that the school calls "Shotdown". These involved repetitious, dull tasks like mopping floors, scrubbing the insides of trash cans, and even cleaning toilets with just a single toothbrush, for hours and hours on end. If you needed to use the bathroom during Shotdown, it's been noted that approval by sometimes six or more superiors was needed before you were able. And even then, an escort was required to supervise you while you were in there.

This, on top of degrading sign wearing, being forced to wear diapers over their pants, and being forced to carry rattles, it's clear that Elan kept an iron grip on their daily operations. Their daily operations that took up most of the daily schedule, and those that were deceptively named by the Elan School themselves – as their "Treatment".

-fade then play snippet-

//GENERAL MEETINGS

But, it doesn't end there.

As a matter of fact, the aforementioned punishments were relatively tame compared to what the school calls – their "General Meetings".

-boom onto school hall room-

There seemed to be no standard for them – they would just happen at random - multiple times each day. If staff were annoyed, or felt like targeting a specific student for some reason, they could call a General Meeting at any time. Once these words were uttered, everyone in the building would be required to gather in front of the student in whichever room they were in.

"Get your feelings off", the administrator screams, and following this, each student in the room would begin berating and screaming at the student, firing off slurs and obscenities for nearly an hour long. No matter how much the student plead for everyone to stop. No matter how much they broke down. No matter how much they cried, General Meetings wouldn't end until the supervisor said so.

And when it finally did, the victim would lie there, often crying and exhausted at the relentless abuse that they'd just endured.

-slight pause-

It's clear that General Meetings aren't designed to reprimand. They're designed to completely break each and every student that's the subject of one. And with this, we can effectively put the points together that Elan was doing nothing more than running an operation that commanded total compliance. Any self-thought or sliver of independence that students think they had was gone. They

were reduced to weapons, or tools, that were constantly being utilized against their fellow peers. Weapons that, at a moments notice, could just as easily be used against them.

-fade, maybe loading screen of a classroom with audio about school and a quote-

Nightfall

7pm.

Contrary to it's focus on academia in outside marketing, school time within Elan was second-hand to the student's treatment. Typically, the timeframe for learning was from 7-11pm, but sometimes could run longer. As you might expect, there were no extracurriculars. No physical education, no projects, no legitimate tests – nothing. Instead, students were required to grade themselves on work that they were self-assigned with absolutely no direction.

The structure of class typically involved a staff member supervising a room full of children. Reportedly, each night of learning involved completing work out of freshman-level textbooks, which, unsurprisingly for a group of teenagers, would be immensely uneventful. Given that class-time was after a long-day full of verbal abuse, monotonous tasks, and a hierarchy system that does nothing but suffocate the lower classes, students dozing off and losing track of their work was expected.

-slight pause-

Curiously, school time, too, was regarded as a privilege at Elan. If students were to be caught dozing off or losing track of their work, they would be promptly punished accordingly. I'm sure you can see the clear negative-feedback loop that they've established here – they wanted students to doze off so they could reprimand them. As is with anything at Elan, academia was never the focus – it was control.

Joe Ricci has gone on record to state that the class schedule itself was designed this way on purpose. Allegedly, he believed students were easier to control while sleep deprived and utilized even *this* as a medium to work against them.

-fade-

//SLEEP

By 11pm, if a student makes it through a night of work without issue, school hours then draw to a close. They're quickly released from class and escorted to their dorms which were often in the form of uncomfortable, impersonal military-styled bunk-beds. Sleep was known to be difficult, as designated students named "*Night Owls*" were assigned to stand guard with flashlights. In regular intervals, they'd shine them on the sleeping students to both ensure that they hadn't escaped, and to secure the fact that they're actually asleep. A requirement that, as we can recall, was also in the list of Elan's rules.

And if one actually manage to calm their nerves, dozing off into their only time of tranquility, that would allow them to effectively place the cap on a day in the nightmare – that is Elan.

-fade to black loading screen – TRANQUILITY-

The Ring

“HOUSE WAKE UP”

-disturbing boom onto 3D model of dorm or a video of bloodshot eyes-

And then you get to do it all over again.

-boom onto 3D model of campus, back it up fast RE8 style-

A notorious aspect of Elan, among everything else that happened there, was something called “The Ring”. Considered the highest level of punishment, Elan staff could make the call to start the Ring at any time.

The structure was set up similar to a General Meeting and was typically commenced when school staff believed that the punishment wasn’t harsh enough for a student in question. In the Ring, the student is designated as a “Bully”, and is outfitted with a faceguard and gloves. Surrounding them are troves of others that are commanded to scream and yell obscenities at them. While this is taking place, specific students would be chosen to compete against the Bully in numerous fist-fights until school staff decided that they were sufficiently injured.

No student was safe from the Ring, either. Some bore pre-existing injuries, some were much smaller in size, and some were even pregnant. Even worse, things seemed to be treated like a game, with superiors commentating on the matches as if they were on TV. In reality, though, this was the furthest thing from TV. It was hand-crafted abuse.

-slight pause-

Elan was meticulous about orchestrating fights for The Ring, too. It was noted that certain students would regularly be punished for another’s actions, effectively engineering anger between them. This was most often noticed between Big Brothers and their subordinates, as they’d be punished for the actions of their newer counterparts. And once they were angry enough, a Ring fight would commence, often injuring students so badly that they’d sustain permanent brain damage, PTSD, and even death.

-slight pause-

//PHIL WILLIAMS DEATH

On the 27th of December, 1982, a 15 year old Elan student named Phillip Williams was placed into the Ring. He wasn’t the largest kid there, but he was known to do what he could to put up a fight. He had grown up in a family of division, regularly witnessing his father physically abuse his mother. With this, there was an anger within him – a sadness that Elan noticed and wanted to exploit.

And so, that evening, a Ring session commenced with Phil as the Bully. There was fight. After fight. After fight. In the end, it’s been reported that he was beaten up so badly that he fell flat on the floor, and it took an entire 20 minutes before an ambulance was called to help him.

“Twenty minutes or so they called the ambulance. They took Phil and they never saw him again”, his sister claims. “I thought it was a wonderful place. I thought they were helping my brother. I thought he was coming home. He came home alright... in a box.”

-slight pause-

Elan's response was that he had regularly faked headaches. The cause of death? A brain aneurism. And no charges were ever filed against them.

-fade-

It's been clear to us from the beginning that Elan is not a place of good. From humiliation, to beratement, to physical abuse, Elan's tactics were archaic and inhumane. For a school that markets itself on academia - on helping students get their lives on track, it's crystal clear that this has never been the motive.

What I find most interesting, though, is that Elan wasn't even the first to utilize this type of therapy – this *Attack Therapy*. In fact, it has its roots in a cult that had found its footing all the way back in the mid-1950s.

-fade-

Synanon

That cult is one by the name of Synanon.

In early 1958, a man by the name of Charles Dederich Sr would found the group in Santa Monica, California. It was intended to be a drug rehabilitation program aimed at delinquents, however in the years that followed, it appeared to stray from that mission entirely.

The distinguishing form of therapy employed by Synanon was something called *The Game*, which, in today's terms, is more commonly known as *Attack Therapy*. The focus of the Game was to break down the social construct of an individuals mind by first allowing them to open up about themselves, before commencing an aggressive beratement session much like we discussed earlier with General Meetings. The primary goal was to recreate someone's personality and sense of self by completely demolishing everything they know about themselves, before rebuilding them as a newer, subjectively better person.

It's been said that members participating in The Game are forbidden from holding back, often encouraged to engage in aggressive verbal hostility. Reportedly, sessions started relatively short, but grew in length as the months went by, eventually running for as long as 72 hours at a time. It's been said that in these sessions, Dederich would convince people to undergo lifechanging operations that they otherwise wouldn't, like aborting pregnancies and undergoing vasectomies.

It hinged on the brink of legality while being entirely immoral. And, unsurprisingly, by 1991, the cult would disband due to criminal convictions that caught up to many of their members. It's founder also died just six years later leaving behind a dark legacy, that, to this day, is known as one of the "*most dangerous and violent cults that America has ever seen*".

-slight pause-

This is, of course, the abridged history. To be honest with you, I could make an entire hour-long video on the operations and practices of Synanon, but that is a story for another day. If there's one takeaway, though – it's that it unknowingly served as an inspiration and blueprint for other institutions to follow.

One of those - being Elan, and by utilizing similar practices, they appeared to “carry the torch” that Synanon was forced to abandon. They knew that they had to keep up appearances too, thriving off of an immaculate public image spearheaded by the charisma of Joe Ricci. Before the age of the internet, admittedly this was easier to do. Television documentaries like NBC’s For the Child’s Own Good, were seemingly the only inside-look that the public was allowed to gain, however even they failed to convey the true extent of what happened there.

The hush-hush foundation that Elan was built upon initially seemed to be unbreakable. However, due to a rise in public attention that would soon find it’s way there, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the cracks beneath that school off of Number Five Road – were merely beginning to form.

-fade-

Some Eyes on Elan

-play beginning of For the Childs Own Good-

//GRASSROOTS

Through the late 70s and into the early 80s, reports of the true nature of Elan began to spread by word-of-mouth from former students. Authorities in Maine reportedly visited the school upwards of 12 times to investigate, however returned with absolutely nothing to show for it. Frustratingly, the operation that Joe Ricci was running was completely and entirely legal. There were no laws in place for facilities like this, so it was allowed to remain in operation without issue.

As we touched on, the media was the primary “in” for outsiders at Elan, however even they failed to communicate the extent of their operations. While they showed select bits of it, unfortunately Joe Ricci was given enough airtime to convince the public and the news crew that it was nothing more than their treatment taking place. By dehumanizing the students, emphasizing their delinquencies on national television, he was able to use this notoriety to his advantage, ultimately swaying the public opinion into believing that what he was doing – was entirely good.

-fade-

School alumni, though, which were only growing in numbers by the early 80s – were far from satisfied. Banding together, they would subsequently form a grassroots movement to bring the true nature of Elan’s abominations to public attention. This proved to be somewhat successful, too, resulting in a handful of counties across the US forbidding county judges and parents from sending their children the institution.

//ESCAPEES

On top of the growing number of alumni, though, came an increase in escapees which only furthered Elan’s unwanted infamy. Over the years, three students – a 16-year-old unidentified individual, a 15-year-old Brad Glickman, and a 17-year old Dawn Birnbaum would all escape successfully, however would meet wildly differing fates.

For the 16-year old, it’s been reported that he ran over 15 miles through the wilderness in the middle of the night. He was eventually caught by an Officer Max Ashburn, who went by the nickname Officer

Smiley, and after hearing the boy's story and observing his physical condition, he helped him return home. Unfortunately, due to this, he was subsequently relieved from duty.

For Brad Glickman, he was shot. In 1990, after escaping Elan's search parties in the middle of the night, he made his way to a house in a small town. Authorities believed that he had a connection to the girl that lived there, however a gunman within the home promptly opened fire on him.

And for Dawn Birnbaum, she, too, had escaped the clutches of Elan, eventually finding a trucker named James Cruz who was willing to take her home. A few hours down the road, though, Cruz's true intentions would reveal themselves.

As it turned out, he sexually assaulted her on the side of the highway, before strangling and abandoning her body between routes 26 and 550 in Pennsylvania. She was discovered by another motorist with a yellow rope tied around her neck, and without clothes from the waist down. And from her corpse were tire tracks resembling that of a semi-trailer. Since Birnbaum had crossed state lines, an FBI investigation was commenced for her, and after cross-checking with numerous similar cases that have happened in the area, the truck belonging to James Cruz was deemed as the culprit. Upon catching up to him and searching his vehicle, authorities were able to find but a single blonde hair that belonged to Birnbaum, effectively leading to his arrest.

-fade-

Much to the school's displeasure, these cases successfully gained ample attention. Joe Ricci resultingly paid off numerous judges and journalists in hopes of drowning out the negative press, however outsiders were beginning to catch on that these students were running for a reason...

But why?

All Eyes on Elan

//THE MURDER OF MARTHA MOXLEY

-3D suburban street at night-

On the night of October 30th, 1975, a 15-year old girl named Martha Moxley was out with her friends participating in what they call "*Mischief night*". This typically involved teepeeing houses, ding dong ditching - typical teenager antics. Later that night, Moxley found a liking to a Thomas Skakel, eventually kissing him before the pair decided to venture off. To the other friends in their group, seeing Moxley fall over the Skakel's backyard fence with Thomas was the last time they would ever see her alive.

-transition to daytime-

The next morning, the Moxley family awakens as usual. They go about their morning routine, however notice that Martha is missing. Upon searching the house for her, they notice a body lying by the tree out in the backyard...

...They approach it, and discover a grim scene. Martha is lying, lifeless, with her pants down. Her body appears to have been visibly beaten, and a few feet away from the body – broken remnants of a six-iron golf club. This club was eventually traced back to the Skakel family.

Autopsy reports claimed that she was bludgeoned and stabbed to death, all by that six-iron. And since Thomas Skakel was the last person she was spotted with that night, he was the prime suspect in her murder.

-slight pause-

Due to a lack of sufficient evidence, however, he, among the other suspects, were eventually absolved. And as a result, the Moxley case, frustratingly, went cold.

-fade-

[1978]

//MICHAEL SKAKEL CONFESSES

Three years later.

18-year old Michael Skakel is arrested for drunk driving. His punishment? Admission to Elan.

While there, Skakel was known to be – problematic and outspoken. According to Elan students at the time, he would regularly boast about a girl named Martha and how he sexually assaulted and killed her. One student named Gregory Coleman recalls this vividly, recounting how Michael had gone on record to state that “*I’m going to get away with murder. I’m a Kennedy.*” The Kennedy reference was alluding to his relation to Robert F. Kennedy, something that would prove pivotal in launching his eventual trial to the national spotlight.

At the time of his confession, though, nobody was able to do anything about it. Given the overbearing nature of the ruleset at school, any student that tried to tell someone about this was promptly reprimanded.

-fade-

//THE TRIAL OF MICHAEL SKAKEL

It would take 22 years before Skakel’s actions would reach the public eye.

In January of 2000, he was arrested and charged with the murder of Martha Moxley, and due to his relation to the Kennedys, it was a case that commanded the airwaves. Since Skakel’s primary vehicle of bragging about his crimes was Elan, this, by proxy, had also thrust the school into the national spotlight.

Dozens of students took the stand, exposing the callousness that occurred there. The humiliation. The General Meetings. The beatings. The Ring. The deaths. All of it was brought into the public eye. Realizing this, Joe Ricci did everything he possibly could to keep discussion about his operation to a minimum. He eventually took the stand, downplaying any mention of Elan, touting it’s high success rate, and doing everything he possibly could to divert the attention back to Skakel and Skakel only. But, this was only marginally effective, as this was in the 2000s. An interconnected era of information, catalyzed by a little something called the Internet.

-slight pause-

Michael Skakel was eventually found guilty of the murder and was sentenced to 20 years to life in prison. After serving just 11 years behind bars, he was granted a new trial in 2013, in which he was let go after posting a 1.2 million dollar bond. Today, he walks a free man.

-slight pause-

But back then, the cat was out of the bag. The inhumanities committed at the Elan school were documented in one of the most high-profile cases in decades, and because of this, people began talking. Theorizing. And investigating, effectively marking the beginning of the end of Joe Ricci's iron grip – on the hundreds of students that were helpless beneath him.

-long fade-

The Downfall of Elan

//THE DEATH OF JOE RICCI

But with his weakening grasp on the media surrounding his operation – came a different hurdle that Joe Ricci would soon have to overcome. In June of 2000, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. Caused by his well-known addiction to cigarettes, this led to him undergoing an aggressive form of chemotherapy. By the time treatment began, however, it was clear that his life was already at its end. Since the cancer had gone unreported for so long, it had spread across his body effectively marking the fact that their treatment was too little too late. And so, Joseph Ricci was a dead man walking – but just how much time did he have left?

-slight pause-

On the 29th of January 2001, Joe Ricci would pass away in Portland, Maine at just 54 years old. As a result, his second wife, Sharon Terry would take over operations of Elan. It was clear, though, that due to the increasing publicity spearheaded by the Skakel case among the rising alumni testimonies, the idea of Terry having a lot of work on her plate was putting it lightly.

Throughout the years, numerous changes would be put in place in response to outside criticism of the Elan School. For instance, “the Ring” was eventually forbidden from being used as punishment. While this was substantially a good thing, the other horrors would remain. What Sharon Terry was unaware of, though, was that due to the rapid rise in technology, namely the Internet – even her reign over Elan would soon meet its demise.

-fade-

When the water settled following the Skakel case, mentions of Elan were made on various forums throughout the next few years. They would get people talking, however it wasn't quite enough for definite action. By 2010, though, something would change. A website that we all know very well would help spearhead one of the most effective expose stories in the history of the Internet.

-boom onto Reddit-

//THE REDDIT MOMENT

It was Reddit.

On the 26th of November, 2010, a man named Jeff W, who went by u/Gzasmhero, would make a post, titled: *Even skimming this post once will blow your mind. Most probably think it's made up but you'd be dead wrong.*

Within it, he explains that he was an Elan student in 1998, before outlining, in detail, the reality of what took place there.

[scroll through post]

They're mostly points that we've already covered and explored in great detail tonight, but back then, these claims were unbelievable. The school was very-much still in operation, so people initially had a tough time wrapping their head around the fact that a place like this actually existed.

-slight pause-

But then came the comments. The other stories from other alumni – with their own experiences. Gzasmhero's post carried weight. It was real. And it needed to be known.

Eventually, this thread would rack up over 2000 likes and 1.4 thousand comments. While this may not have caused Elan's closure outright, it aggressively reopened old wounds. 2010 was not 2000. The Internet userbase was exponentially larger than it had been, and resultingly, the effectiveness of this newfound attention caused a substantial amount of backlash that the Elan School had never before experienced.

-long fade-

But would it be enough?

The Aftermath of Elan

Four months later.

On the 23rd of March, 2011, the Elan School announced that it would soon be shutting down. Sharon Terry blamed the call on what they deemed to be libelous remarks made about them online.

"The school has been the target of harsh and false attacks spread over the internet with the avowed purpose of forcing the school to close" ... "The school, unfortunately, has been unable to survive the damage".

And on the 1st of April, 2011, The Elan School would close it's doors for one final time. Officially, they blamed it on declining student numbers in hopes of diverting the attention away from the actual cause. But, on the outside, everyone knew the real reason. For students, this was unbelievably good news – however the damage they endured was something that would remain everlasting.

-slight pause-

It's been reported that numerous suicides have occurred as a result of attendance at Elan. PTSD with alumni is rampant, and it's clear that the school had done nothing but damage people. A filmmaker and former student named Todd Nilssen, creator of an incredible Elan documentary named The Last Stop, has gone on record to state that as a student, he was helped by their unconventional tactics, but he knew that the majority of others weren't quite so lucky.

Today, hundreds of stories remain online about the cruelty committed at The Elan School. About the façade that they upheld for 41 years. Reading through these are eye-opening, and you can find them on nearly every piece of media and documentation that exists about Elan online. To all of you that have shared your stories, that have opened up about the torment you went through – your voice is the reason that Elan ceases to exist today.

This video would not exist without you, and I wish I could say that I feel your pain. But I don't. What I do know – is that nobody deserves to be treated like an animal. Nobody deserves to be put through brutality like this. And I can confidently say that the world is a better place without an institution like Elan remaining in operation.

While there are and have been other facilities like this throughout history, those are another story for another time. The legacy that Elan left behind is a dark one. Knowing the history of what occurred off of Number Five road is haunting, and no matter if it forever stands physically, the psychological destruction that it left behind will unfortunately forever –

Remain.

-roll credits: silent, pensive music-