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JUPITER

A Florida couple kept an adopted teen locked in the garage. Their lawyer says they had no choice

*usually closed garage door at the end of a cul-de-sac in Jupiter's Egret Landing
Timothy and Tracy Ferriter hid a secret.*



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JUPITER — Behind a perpetually closed garage door at the end of a cul-de-sac in Jupiter's Egret Landing neighborhood, Timothy and Tracy Ferriter hid a secret.

It was an 8-by-8-foot room that could be unlocked only from the outside. The couple kept their 14-year-old adopted teen there for up to 18 hours at a time, according to interviews town police officers did with the teen and their three siblings.

A twin-sized bed stood opposite a desk in the windowless room, with an air-conditioning unit in one wall and a light placed above. A Home Depot bucket sat in the corner for the teen to use as a bathroom.

A small camera captured the teen's movements as they did their homework and slept in the room. The teen spent their days in the family's garage — Christmas decorations and basketballs were stored just feet away.

The Ferriters' secret became international news in February, after the teen ran away and police found the child on the grounds of a nearby middle school — and then charged the adult Ferriters with aggravated child abuse, a first-degree felony punishable by up to 30 years in prison, and false imprisonment. Both have pleaded not guilty.

The Palm Beach Post is not identifying the teen by name or gender, but public records and court proceedings offer clues to what life was like inside the one-story house on Crane Point

North: The Ferriter teen said they endured constant surveillance and both physical and verbal assault from their parents while their siblings were spared.

Timothy and Tracy Ferriter have made no public statements since their arrests Feb. 8, but they have hired West Palm Beach criminal defense attorney Nellie King, a past president of the Florida Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, to represent them.

King has cast doubt on evidence obtained by the Florida Department of Children and Families in its investigation, pressured the Jupiter Police Department to turn over hundreds of hours of video footage from the room's camera and suggested that police didn't take the child's behavior — which she described as violent and escalating — into account when arresting the couple.

"There are a number of issues you do not know involving (the teen)," King wrote to Jupiter police on behalf of her clients.

Those issues, King said in the letter, included the teen torturing animals, injuring their parents and bringing knives and weapons to school.

Now, the teen and the Ferriters' three other children are in DCF's custody while their parents await trial, charged with a crime at odds with a neighborhood dotted by children's tree swings and basketball hoops.

Behind a Jupiter couple's child abuse charges: A secret locked room and a troubled family

How does Florida's adoption system support, or fail, families?

The emergence of details in the Ferriters' case raises questions about how Florida's adoption system, which is designed to over-prepare adoptive families to welcome a new child, can allow abuse to fester.

The system requires parents to complete a 10-step training process that includes background checks and a home study. The process is so grueling that some counselors credit it with discouraging people from adopting altogether because they don't feel prepared.

Sealed adoption records ensure that few details about how a child changes hands are available to the public, the child or, in some cases, the family. For the Ferriters, it's unlikely

the teen's adoption records will be unsealed unless King or some other attorney finds it beneficial to their case and convinces a judge to open them.

Attorneys and adoption counselors who work in Florida said the state's adoption system allows children with mental illnesses to fall through the cracks once their birth parents' rights are terminated.

"When you adopt a child, that's your kid. There's no one to tell you what to do. There's no one to be the boss," said Kevin Slack, an adoption counselor who works with families in Florida and North Carolina. "You're stuck on your own trying to figure this out."

Read the story: Did Florida's adoption system fail Jupiter teen forced to live in a locked garage room?

What role did the child's behavior play in the Ferriters' choice to build the room?

From the Ferriters' first court appearance, King has maintained that the Ferriter teen had severe behavioral issues that made living with them difficult. She has suggested that DCF investigators didn't have all the context they should to understand the teen.

Reactive attachment disorder (RAD), which Tracy told Jupiter police officers the child suffers from, is a rare condition where children don't form an emotional bond with their caretakers, according to the Cleveland Clinic.

Its website specifically says children who are adopted may experience RAD, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the guidebook used by mental health professionals, classifies it as a trauma- and stressor-related condition. It often appears in early childhood, and it stems from social neglect and maltreatment.

Symptoms, while they vary greatly between children, include:

- Not showing positive emotions like comfort, love or joy when interacting with others.

- Avoiding eye contact and physical touch.

- Expressing fear or anger by throwing tantrums.

- Showing unhappiness or sadness.

- Breaking rules.

In a letter to DCF the day before the Ferriters' arrests, King wrote that the 14-year-old had pushed more than one family member, causing fractures and other injuries, and attacked a classmate. The child also "fantasizes about killing people," the letter said.

Those in adoption circles say adoptive children in Florida are not entitled to mental health services or therapy, which can be more accessible to children in foster care.

Still, they add that no matter the teen's mental illnesses, the Ferriter parents were wrong if in fact they locked them in the garage room and isolated the teen from the family.

"It's never OK to harm a child, never OK not to provide safety for a child," said Maurya Glaude, a licensed clinical social worker and a professor of practice at Tulane University School of Social Work in New Orleans.

Read more: Jupiter parents say adopted teen locked in garage room had attachment disorder. What that means

Ferriters moved to quickly demolish garage room after arrest

Although the Ferriter family returned to Jupiter in the last six months, their troubles with their teenager can be traced through public records from their previous home in Arizona, where the family spent four years.

Twice while the family was living near Tucson, the child ran away and the incidents were reported to local police. In one instance, according to court documents, the child was found with credit cards that were reported stolen. Both runaway incidents happened in the two months before the Ferriters returned to Jupiter.

After their move, Timothy and Tracy Ferriter quickly hired a contractor to build a garage room that mirrored one in their previous Florida home, which was a few streets away in Egret Landing.

As the contractor considered the plans for the 8-by-8 foot room with an exterior lock and air conditioning, something didn't feel right. He called Jupiter police in late December and reported the strange request. Officers took a report but never talked to the Ferriters about how the family planned to use the room.

After their arrest in February, the Ferriters moved hastily to dismantle the garage room, according to the owner of the demolition company they hired to do the job.

"They were in such a rush," said Rebecca Miller, owner of Boynton Beach-based DemoBoyyz. "They didn't seem to care about price. They just wanted it done."

Read the story: 'They were in such a rush': After arrests, Florida couple demolished garage room where teen lived

Staff writer Julius Whigham contributed to this story.

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