

Hope Children's Home survives dark times

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TAMPA — The Hope Children's Home is an idyllic place for troubled children, helping youngsters whose parents are unable to care for them.

But until recently, the people who ran the charity were at war with one another, fighting for control of the biblically based home that is supported by private and corporate donations.

The divisions came into sharp focus last week when the former chief financial officer, who is the son of the founder, agreed to plead guilty to a federal fraud charge, admitting he embezzled more than \$187,000.

That money, the exec

utive director says, could have paid for a new cottage and enabled the home to take in more children instead of having to turn some away.

Set on 55 lush acres, the dormitories, cottages and school provide support, education and structure underpinned with Baptist teachings for infants to high school students whose parents no longer can care for them.

Precocious kids wearing school uniforms giggle, play and joke with visitors, using polite salutations.

During a visit last week, a little towheaded girl in a plaid pleated skirt ran up to the executive director, Mike Higgins, and offered a hug.

As she happily skipped away, Higgins said, "She came in when she was 3 weeks old. She was homeless, sleeping in the woods with her mother." She now is a resident with her four siblings and about 70 other children.

With Christmas approaching, the trappings of the season are everywhere, from a large manger to gifts and trips for the children to sponsored parties.

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The home appears to be flourishing in spite of the turmoil that has rocked the leadership since 2011.

In October of that year, Alfred Schaffer, the chief financial officer who also was a Tampa fire captain, was caught embezzling.

Higgins said Schaffer's assistant noticed some discrepancies in the books and went to Higgins. Higgins said he and others approached Schaffer, who initially waffled but within minutes confessed he had been stealing from the home for 17 years.

Schaffer hand-wrote a resignation letter citing his "inappropriate behavior."

Higgins said Schaffer actually admitted stealing nearly \$400,000 from the charity, more than twice what he admitted in his plea agreement.

The evidence, Higgins said, was ironclad. But bringing a case against Schaffer was not so easy.

Higgins said staff at the home initially reported the theft to the Internal Revenue Service and the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office. He said the sheriff's office said nothing could be done unless the home's governing board made a formal request.

Sheriff's spokesman Larry McKinnon said there's no record that anyone from the home reported any embezzlement until June of this year. At that time, deputies immediately began investigating and ultimately turned the case over to federal agents, he said.

Higgins said staff at the home also sent packages of evidence to Tampa Fire Chief Tom Forward, notifying him of what Schaffer had done.

But department spokesman Jason Penny said the department received only an anonymous letter with tax documents attached. Because the letter was anonymous, the department couldn't act on it, Penny said.

Higgins said he doesn't know whether the children's home staff put their names on the letters to the chief.

And Higgins said the governing board didn't formally ask for law enforcement action because it split into factions.

Schaffer's father, Ron, was founder of the home. Higgins said Ron Schaffer backed his son. The board of directors divided, a fissure that devolved into litigation and efforts to get rid of Higgins.

"We couldn't get anything done for two years," Higgins said. "It was a dysfunctional board." They couldn't agree on anything, he said. "Not painting a building. It was horrible."

The board did ask for a formal audit in February 2012 and started trying to persuade Al Schaffer to repay the money that was stolen.

In the meantime, the audit turned up questions about retirement money that was paid to Ron Schaffer every month. The money was not part of a federally approved retirement plan, so the payments had to stop, Higgins said.

That started "World War III," Higgins said. "Al kind of got lost in the background. The battle became these retirement payments."

Lawsuits were filed, Higgins said. Ron Schaffer tried to get Higgins deposed. The battle was ugly.

Higgins said he once counted Al Schaffer among his best friends, a dependable and dedicated worker who didn't just do the books on his days off but also pitched in on construction projects and other things that needed doing.

"It was hard to get my head around" the betrayal, Higgins said. "I had to look at the evidence long and hard, but it was so conclusive."

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Another person who once considered Schaffer one of his closest friends is Ike Rives, a fellow firefighter who does pest control work at the children's home and is one of a group of firefighters who worked at the airport and sponsored one of the dorm rooms at the home.

Rives, who retired from the fire department in August, said he saw definitive evidence about a year ago that Schaffer had embezzled.

He confronted Schaffer. Schaffer "broke down, started crying," Rives said.

Schaffer told him his kids deserve to be raised by their father, that he shouldn't have to go to jail. "I said, 'You should have thought about that before you stole their money.'?"

The next day, Rives said, Schaffer did an about-face and went on the offense. He denied wrongdoing. Rives started telling everyone at the airport what Schaffer had done. Schaffer fought back, Rives said, and officials believed him.

"I did run my mouth, because I knew he was guilty and I wasn't going to let him sit back and tell people he was innocent," Rives said.

Rives said he was transferred out of the airport to one of the city's busiest engine companies, a place considered punishment for firefighters.

In the middle of all this, Al Schaffer was promoted to fire captain. Last week, when his plea agreement was filed with the court, he was suspended without pay.

Fire department spokesman Penny denied Rives was retaliated against for blowing the whistle on Schaffer. His transfer, Penny said, had nothing to do with Schaffer. If Rives felt he had suffered reprisals, Penny said, he had avenues of redress, none of which he followed.

Higgins said the lawsuit Ron Schaffer filed against him went away after Ron Schaffer died last year.

Ultimately, Higgins said, a judge appointed a new chief executive officer, who installed a new governing board this year.

And Higgins said after the embezzlement was unearthed, officials created a slew of new accounting practices and procedures to ensure it won't happen again. The books are audited annually by a professional firm.

Supporters of the home, he said, are relieved Al Schaffer is being prosecuted.

"We're supported by a lot of corporations in Tampa, a lot of affluent folks," Higgins said. "The fact that this wolf in sheep's clothing was amongst us and did this, they have a real issue with that."

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