

Published: Jan 17, 2008 12:00 AM

Modified: Jan 17, 2008 02:25 AM

School founder kills self instead of going to prison

MARTHA QUILLIN, Staff Writer

[Comment on this story](#)

The founder of a Christian school for troubled boys who had pleaded guilty to financial fraud and deception in its operation appears to have fatally shot himself days after he was supposed to report to prison.

Robert Serge Gluhareff pleaded guilty in April to two counts of bank fraud, one count of tax fraud, and one count of mail fraud in connection with the Wellspring Academy outside South Boston, Va. The school had many students from Raleigh when it was open. A federal judge sentenced Gluhareff to 30 months, and Gluhareff was to begin the sentence Jan. 8, but he didn't appear.

Person County Sheriff Dewey Jones said that on Friday, Gluhareff left his home in South Boston and said he was going to meet a client. When he didn't return, family members started a search.

On Sunday, Jones said, a Person County deputy came across Gluhareff's truck on the side of a rural road. Witnesses told deputies the truck had been there since at least 8 p.m. Friday. Deputies searched nearby woods and found Gluhareff's body and a .38-caliber handgun.

Gluhareff started the Wellspring Academy in the 1980s, first recruiting students from the Triangle and later enrolling students from across the country. It began as a coeducational facility but was converted to a boys school. Parents whose sons had behavioral and other problems paid tuitions of more than \$40,000 per year for the residential program. Gluhareff promised a structured setting with academics, religion and individual counseling on a 510-acre farm.

On Easter weekend of 2003, Gluhareff announced the school would close immediately.

Investigators with the U.S. Postal Service, the Virginia State Police and the IRS later found that the school's finances had been a shambles for years, that Gluhareff had frequently deposited fraudulent checks from his personal account into the school's account and had withdrawn the money before the fraud could be detected. They said he would demand payment of half a student's tuition with the promise that the checks would not be cashed until the parents had amassed the money, but he deposited the checks and withdrew funds against them before the money was there.

Initially, Gluhareff faced dozens of charges. Most were dismissed when he pleaded guilty.

Jackie Mitchell Jr. was one of many parents who lost tens of thousands of dollars in tuition. He had paid in the hope that Gluhareff could help his son, then 13 and diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Mitchell, a contractor who lives outside of Raleigh, said his son told him immediately that things "were not right" at the school, but Mitchell thought it was just because his son didn't want to be there.

Mitchell and other parents, who were never reimbursed for their losses, considered Gluhareff's 30-month sentence too lenient. When he learned Gluhareff had killed himself, Mitchell said, "I

don't know how I feel. There was no justice done in the first place."

martha.quillin@newsobserver.com or (919) 829-8989

Get \$150+ in coupons in every Sunday N&O. [Click here for convenient home delivery.](#)

© Copyright 2008, The News & Observer Publishing Company

A subsidiary of [The McClatchy Company](#)