

## KIDS BEHIND BARS

AP PHOTO  
Brandon Wallager, Jason's younger brother, was charged with murder, but charges were dropped.

## PRISONS

Young inmates often learn more about crime

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The new law, enacted in January 1997, also allows prosecutors to try kids of any age as adults in Family Court, where a judge can choose between an adult punishment and juvenile rehabilitation, or a combination of the two.

Under the old law, Wallager would have gone to a juvenile program, possibly the state-run W.J. Maxey Training School in Whitmore Lake. Maxey would have been forced to release him when he turned 21.

Instead, Wallager pleaded guilty as an adult to second-degree murder in Mason County Circuit Court and was sentenced in June 1998 to 20 to 50 years in prison. His first parole date is in 2013. He'll be 31.

And he said he's getting little help.

In a five-month investigation into the treatment of juveniles in state prisons, The Press found that youths like Wallager get little counseling behind bars.

"You need to protect the public now," said Oakland County Probate Judge Eugene Moore. "But the ultimate question is not just short-term protection. Are we going to change them so when they're released the public is going to be protected from further crime?"

Moore got national attention in January when he sentenced 13-year-old Nathaniel Abraham to a juvenile program instead of prison for killing a man when he was 11.

"When you're talking about kids, you should at least try the juvenile system first," Moore said.

Elizabeth Arnovits, executive director of the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency, said the new laws are shortsighted.

"The prison system is there to safely detain and house people who are sent to them," she said. "They don't give a damn about correcting. They will do some things and offer opportunities, but that is not their primary mission."

But state Sen. William Van Regenmorter, R-Jenison, said Wallager's case shows why the state needed to change the law to lock up younger kids. VanRegenmorter worked with Gov. John Engler's office to draft the legislation. Juvenile judges asked for the options, he said.

"If there's a fundamental principle, a single one, it is this: There are a few juveniles who are so incredibly dangerous that we need to give the criminal justice system the authority to keep the rest of us safe," VanRegenmorter said.

Mason County Prosecutor Cris VanOosterum said prison is the only place for Wallager.

In Jason's case, the decision left to me as a prosecuting attorney was not where Jason could get the most treatment," said VanOosterum, who prosecuted the case. "The real concern was the safety of the people, the community as a whole."

A relative of Carl Wallager said she feels no sorrow for Jason. "That's where he belongs," said the Mason County woman, who asked not to be named. "But if he has a chance to get out, he better have counseling, or he'll be doing it again."

State Corrections Director Bill Martin, whose department operates the state's 41 prisons, said they give prisoners a chance to better themselves.

"We're not a place in which you throw people in the cell, throw away the key and come back in 10 years and get him out," he said. "If an individual comes to us and wants to be rehabilitated, we have the tools to do it, and we do."

ers think of them. Wallager said he's not involved in any group therapy.

At the privately run Michigan Youth Correctional Facility in Baldwin, where the state sends most juveniles sentenced as adults, there are fewer programs. Four counselors with bachelor's degrees in social work meet with the prison's 330 inmates, but there are no substance-abuse programs or anger-management classes.

A psychologist and psychiatrist from Mason-Lake County Community Mental Health are on call for at least 10 hours a week.

Seven teachers provide GED classes and one vocational program, teaching kids how to be janitors. The prison hopes soon to provide computer classes.

Youth prison Warden Dave Trippett said Wackenhut Corrections Corp. of Florida, which runs the prison under a contract with the state, plans to hire two social workers soon and provide anger-management classes.

Young prisoners at other state prisons also complain about a lack of help.

"It don't teach you nothing," said Christopher Peltier, one of three teens convicted in 1996 of killing clerk Rodney Corp at the Beer Kooler party store in Grand Rapids.

"The only thing taught here is to become a better criminal," he said from the state's Alger Maximum Facility in the Upper Peninsula. "The older guys will teach you stuff you didn't know. If a guy doesn't know how to steal a car, he'll teach you."

These are lessons Peltier will never be able to use. He's in prison for life without parole.

Willie Clemons, who was 16 when he shot and killed 20-year-old Jason Stanfield in the parking lot of Fulton Heights Foods in 1995, said he's learned how to protect himself.

"I've learned a lot of things, like if somebody puts a candy bar on a bed, and I come back to the cell, I'm not going to mess with that candy bar," said Clemons, who's serving a life sentence at the Ionia Maximum Facility. "I know in the past those candy bars have cost guys their lives."

## 'A lot of bad things'

Wallager has always been a handful. He was taking psychotropic drugs to help control severe emotional problems as a young boy, said his mother, Sheila Virgis. "He was in and out of institutions," she said.

Wallager said he was diagnosed as oppositional defiant, hyperactive and bipolar when he was in kindergarten and living with his parents in Coral Springs, Fla.

"I wasn't really the goody-goody kind of kid. Me and my brother did a lot of bad things. Spray-painted the neighbor's house," he said.

When his parents divorced in 1991, his father demanded custody of Jason and his younger brother, Brandon. Their mother agreed.

Their father suffered a heart attack in January 1996, and Jason thought he would die. Wishful thinking, he said. He and his brother moved in with their mother in Florida, but they returned to their father two weeks later, he said.

Jason said he hated his father, so, he claimed, hit him and his brother with boards, mops and once with a cable wire.

Allegations of abuse also were raised in court hearings after Jason was charged with murder.

But the relative who asked not to be named said she never saw the father abuse Jason. "It was the other way around," she said. "I kept on telling Carl that boy was going to kill him. I didn't think it was going to be that way. I thought he was going to give him a heart attack."

The victim's third wife, Stephanie Wallager, has said Jason had pulled a butcher knife on her when he was 10 and had talked about killing his father.

Then, on July 13, 1997, Jason and his father argued.

A deputy testified that Jason responded with an obscenity when his father told him to go to bed. "You don't talk to me like that in my house," the father answered as he punched Jason in the face.

Jason picked up a knife from the floor and stabbed his father in the chest. He then stabbed him 18 more times.

The boys first called their mother in Florida to say their father was dead. Jason was covered with blood when he and his brother ran across the street to call 911 at a pay phone.

"I stabbed my dad, I stabbed him once in the chest. I think he's dead," Jason yelled as a deputy pulled up.

The deputy found Carl Wallager covered with bedding on a bedroom floor, with wounds also on his hands and arm as if he'd tried to defend himself.

Brandon, then 13, at first was charged with open murder, but the charge was dropped for insufficient evidence.

'I'm growing up in prison'

Jason Wallager's appellate attorney, Debra Gutierrez, of the state Appellate Defender's Office, refused to let him discuss details of the homicide in an interview. She's appealing the automatic waiver law that allowed prosecutors to send him to adult court.

Wallager said he expected the

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BILL MARTIN  
Department of Corrections director

worst when he got to the Michigan Reformatory.

"At the time, I was the youngest one in here. That's pretty much how I survived in here. Other inmates said they had kids my age, and they felt sorry for me."

He said he's been approached by homosexual inmates, but it was subtle, almost like a teen-age boy asking a girl for a date. They offer to help or to buy him something at the prison store. He knows an inmate who's 50 or 60

and calls himself Linda.

"I've seen a lot of things happen in here. I've seen people get beat up, seen people get stabbed. I see people get stabbed over someone taking their stamps. Gang fights."

His biggest fear is getting stabbed, just like his father.

"I'm growing up in prison," he said. "People think that when I get out, I'll be better. There's no rehabilitation here. Congress is sending little children to prison, and they expect them to come out better."

He said he will come out "bitter, very very bitter."

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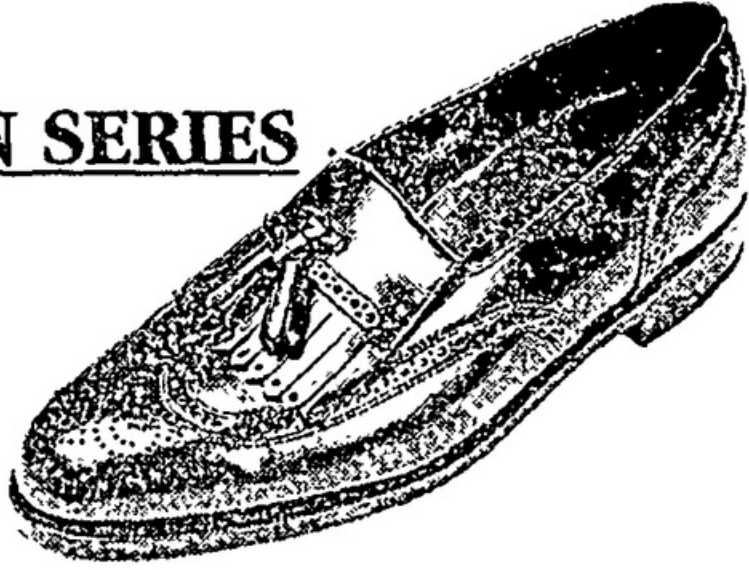
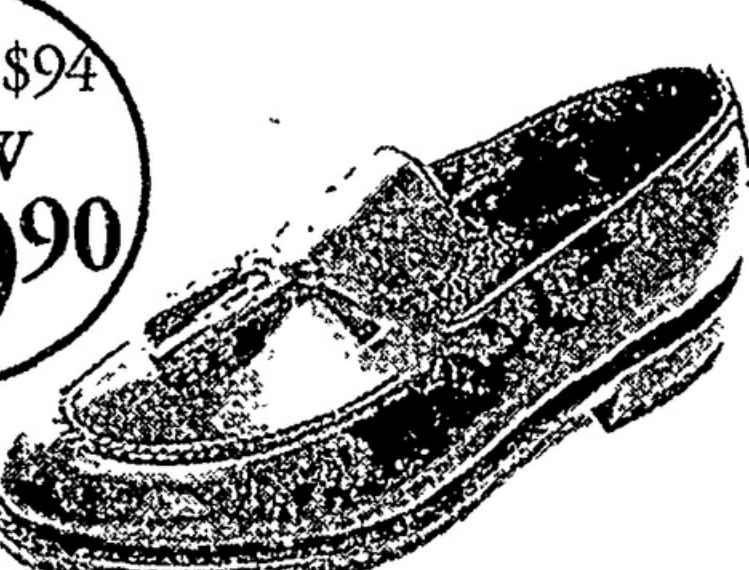
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