

KIDS BEHIND BARS

LEARNING
PRISON'S
LESSONS

*Critics say lack of
counseling and
rehabilitation turns youths
into greater menaces*

LAST IN A SERIES

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

IONIA — At age 14, this was Jason Wallager's proudest moment.

He dreamed about this. He dug a grave in the woods out back. He parked a pickup out front to cart off the body.

Jason made a home movie showing himself pretending to stab his brother over and over as he napped on the couch in their one-story wood-frame home in Walhalla, a small town about 20 miles east of Ludington.

On July 13, 1997, Wallager played out that movie, but the victim was his father, Carl Wallager. The seventh-grader stabbed him 19 times with a kitchen knife until his father, a retired soldier, was dead.

Wallager is 17 now.

In a prison interview, Wallager's eyes light up and a smile flashes across his boyish face when conversation turns to killing his father.

He is among the youngest prisoners at the Michigan Reformatory, a century-old prison on top of a hill overlooking Ionia, with the old-fashioned bars and brick walls topped with razor wire.

"I did it. I did it, and it was fun, too. He got what he deserved," Wallager said. "I feel apathy more than remorse. He was an abomination. He plagued society. I was doing the world a favor."

Wallager was the first 14-year-old charged as an adult with murder in Michigan under a state law that



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Jason Wallager, now 17, is at the Michigan Reformatory.



AP PHOTO

Headed to prison: Jason Wallager, then 14, listens to proceedings at his preliminary hearing in Mason County District Court in July 1997. Wallager was sentenced to 20 to 50 years in prison for murdering his father.

allows prosecutors to automatically waive juveniles as young as 14 to adult court for serious crimes. The lower limit before was age 15.

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Lawmaker promises hearings on
'inhumane treatment' in system

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

The chairman of the state Senate Judiciary Committee will hold hearings on the state prison system after a Grand Rapids Press report detailed what he called the "in-

humane treatment" of juveniles.

Sen. William VanRegenmorter, R-Georgetown Township, said his committee will investigate conditions at the privately run Michigan Youth Correctional Facility in Baldwin, where the state sends most juveniles — boys and girls 16 and

under — sentenced as adults to prison.

The committee also will try to determine why the state Department of Corrections allows juveniles to share prison cells with

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INSIDE

■ When Carl Norman, then 14, killed his neighbor, the law required he be treated as a juvenile. Will he be ready for freedom when he is released in less than two years? A4

SERIES AT A GLANCE

SUNDAY: The new Michigan Youth Correctional Facility near Baldwin is more violent than the state's six adult maximum-security prisons.

MONDAY: Guards fear for their lives in the youth prison. They say understaffing leaves some shifts open and makes 70-hour work weeks common.

TUESDAY: A 15-year-old boy shares a cell with a 20-year-old robber; and he's raped. The state has no policy requiring it to separate juveniles from adult inmates.

WEDNESDAY: Nearly three-quarters of the juveniles in prison are minorities.

TODAY: Two teen-age killers, one sentenced as an adult and the other as a juvenile, need help. But are they getting it? A look at two paths for juveniles through the corrections system.