

EXCLUSIVE

BY JOHN MARZULLI
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A SEVERELY autistic man was branded with a searing-hot potato masher by at least one staffer at a Bronx group home for the mentally disabled, leaving him physically and emotionally scarred, a lawsuit charges.

Eduardo Sandoval, 24, has the mental capacity of a toddler and was incapable of identifying the person who attacked him at the Leake & Watts residential facility last June. His torso is permanently disfigured by the distinctive pattern of the kitchen utensil, his older brother said.

"The psychologist said Eddie will have flashes of reliving this in his mind, and because he can't explain what happened to him or who did this, it's horrible," Alfredo Sandoval, said.

"It was inhuman," the brother added. "Cruelty. Not even to an animal, a terrorist, you don't do this to anyone, let alone someone who has the capability of a toddler. It looks like when they brand cattle."

Lawyer Sanford Rubenstein is filing suit Monday in Bronx Supreme Court, accusing Leake & Watts of negligence.

The suit names former Leake & Watts employees Wendell Chavies and Asialone Edwards as the perpetrators. Chavies was arrested by the NYPD, but prosecutors dropped felony assault charges because of insufficient evidence, said a spokesman for the Bronx district attorney's office.

Investigators could not determine a motive, sources said, because Sandoval, who can't speak, could not describe what happened. Chavies and Edwards pointed the finger at each other, the sources added.

The lack of a criminal prosecution infuriates Sandoval's family.

"Someone has to go to jail for a very long time for this," Alfredo Sandoval said.

Eduardo Sandoval, who is unable to bathe or dress himself, has his own apartment on the first floor of the group home on E. 211th St. His body is checked daily for injuries, and that's how the burns on his side and chest were discovered.

Police later found the potato masher in a safe in the basement of the home.

When Chavies accompanied Sandoval to Montefiore Medical Center for treatment, the victim's behavior was revealing, Sandoval's brother said.

"My brother was screaming and looking at him," he said.

The state's Office of People with Developmental Disabilities, which licenses the group home, is investigating.

"It is disgraceful for this helpless young man, in a state facility that is caring for him because of his extreme disabilities, to suffer these horrible injuries," Rubenstein said.

Leake & Watts spokeswoman Meredith Barber said that, following the incident, the state recommended a plan of remedial action, which was implemented. It included the firings of Chavies, Edwards and the group home's manager.

"We took full and decisive action," Barber said.

Fernando Mateo, president of Hispanics Across America, an advocacy group, called on Gov. Cuomo and state Attorney General Eric Schneiderman to review the incident and the ensuing investigations.

Eduardo Sandoval (far r.), with mother Myra, was branded with a potato masher at Bronx residence.



HOT-IRON TORTURE OUTRAGE

Suit: Autistic man branded at group home