Shiny happy confrontations

The second season of *Shiny Happy People* reminds me of my year as a Teen Mania intern—and our efforts to become the standard of holiness for the world.

by Melissa Kuipers
August 12, 2025

Courtesy of Prime Video

“My first memory of you,” Farrah said with a half-smile, “is when you told me my shirt didn’t pass the dress code.” I felt the heat rise in my face. The rodeo stadium hosting the barbecue dinner was air-conditioned, but I might as well have been

outside in the blazing Texas sun. “You told me my shirt was too short,” she explained, passing a basket of cornbread to Jenna. “You were right.” (Names have been changed to protect people’s privacy.)

“I’m so sorry,” I said, squeezing my paper napkin in my lap. This was our last dinner together at Honor Academy, a 12-month internship program designed to form Christian youth to be “the standard” of holiness for the world. I guess its leaders felt that a quintessentially Texan event—eating charred meat and watching men lasso cows—would be a suitable celebration of our impending graduation from “the most important year” of our lives.

The Honor Academy was run by Teen Mania, an organization, now defunct, that is the subject of season 2 of the Amazon documentary series *Shiny Happy People*. I arrived with 700 other young adults at its Edenic campus in rural Texas, where we woke at 4:30 a.m. to run laps in the in the Texas humidity, attended classes on how to be world changers, climbed mountains, and cried in each other’s arms at a spiritualized, military-inspired retreat designed to teach us how to control our emotions. The Honor Academy delivered on its promise to push us to our limits, providing a formative experience that we’d each carry into adulthood.

But on our last day, as we sat around a table with a gingham tablecloth, eating fresh cornbread and talking about when we first met, each of these girls I’d come to love and admire shared their first-impressions of me. I’d told Sarah not to walk on the grass; I’d policed Jenna’s language; I’d told Rachel that when she leaned over I could see a strip of her back and I was concerned about protecting “the innocence of men” on campus and maybe she should consider wearing an undershirt beneath her t-shirt. They laughed as I burned with embarrassment and apologized profusely. “You were just doing what we were all supposed to be doing,” Jenna said, putting a soft hand on my arm. “You just took it further than most people.”

I knew she was right. The leaders told us that if we caught someone in a sin, we should “restore that person gently” (Gal. 6:1). We were taught to hold each other accountable to avoid even the slightest appearance of evil. God had put our leaders in charge, and our leaders made the rules, so it was a sin to break those rules. But like an overzealous hall proctor, I might have relished enforcing the rules a little more than everyone else.

I, like many Honor Academy alumni, watched *Shiny Happy People: A Teenage Holy War* as soon as it dropped in July. I was impressed by the documentary's accurate depictions of the climate and ideology of Teen Mania. The three episodes highlight the most dramatic moments: interns are blindfolded and thrown in a van, then dropped off at an unknown location with nothing but a cross and the clothes on their backs; people dressed as snipers hold (fake?) guns in a stadium stuffed with thousands of screaming teenagers; mud-covered teens weep as they wade through cold water up to their chins; people role-playing in crude approximations of "tribal" dress speak gibberish and wait to be converted by teen evangelists.

But the alumni the filmmakers interviewed also describe the more subtle and insidious aspects of the spiritual trauma many of us experienced at the Honor Academy—the atmosphere that made us willing to crawl through the mud until we wept or to fast for three days straight. I have found it challenging to write about, or even to communicate to friends, exactly how the program's complex, pervasive messaging of self-denial, self-scrutiny, and obsession with sin convinces teens that they are responsible for curbing the sin lurking in every person.

The interview subjects point to this culture of confrontation. Musician Dani Rocca-Herbert recalls being confronted for "singing too well," because it might distract others from true worship. Corey Wright says he felt "tiny" after being confronted for having his Black hair braided: the confronter said that Wright's friend, a girl, was "playing with his hair." The Honor Academy teaches that being alone with the opposite sex is dangerous. "I felt like I couldn't think for myself," Wright says. "There was no questioning authority."

I was one of the people who might have confronted Corey. A perfectionist and a well-practiced goody-two-shoes, I took seriously the Honor Academy's call to love each other through accountability. Learning how to confront others was part of our curriculum. My notes from class explain that the confronter should "give the person the opportunity to save face" and "take a non-confrontational posture when approaching." It became a joke on campus that if someone approached you with their hands in their pockets, you should get ready to be confronted.

The problem wasn't that confrontation was taught and encouraged—Lord knows young people living away from home for the first time need to learn how to have uncomfortable conversations with their roommates. Much of what we learned is genuinely valuable in establishing healthy relationships. The problem was that this

emphasis on confrontation was combined with purity culture, strict obedience to authority, and constant sin-extraction. This turned do-gooder kids like me into uptight rule-mongers.

I never enjoyed confrontation, but there was a thrill of self-righteousness in knowing I was good at removing the sliver from a peer's eye. Pointing out someone's blind spots was a necessary part of our collective pursuit of the standard. Confrontation was self-sacrifice, loving someone else enough to make both of you uncomfortable.

And so the Honor Academy functioned as a panopticon. On that beautiful, sprawling, rural Texas campus, we were under constant surveillance, scrutinizing each other and especially ourselves. Using an intricate web of evaluations given through a hierarchy of leaders, we extracted the sin from our hearts like tiny shards of shrapnel.

Every week, we filled out accountability cards, declaring that we had completed our required exercises, daily devotions, and homework and had shown up to our full-time work placements and classes on time. Every month, our room leaders rated us on a scale of one to five in various areas of our lives, from having appropriate relationships with the opposite gender to our eating habits. Every quarter, we received evaluations from both our resident advisors and workplace supervisors. Our accountability partners were expected to ask us the hard questions every week. *Have you had any impure thoughts? Where might the devil be distracting you from who God is calling you to be?*

Our overloaded schedules and crowded sleeping arrangements led to burnout, but so did this mental load of constantly managing our emotions and thoughts. As journalist Jeff Sharlet says in the show's second episode, "It's not so much about the rules never being broken. It's about people always, always thinking about the rules."

It's hard to articulate what this kind of constant attention to your perceived weaknesses does to your teenage psyche. In my case, I became distant, depressed, and—despite living and working in tight quarters—lonely. I kept a journal in which I transcribed the messages from God that I was perceiving. They depict a deity who always wanted more from me and declared he loved me in order to get it. I was riddled with anxiety, unable to sleep, and developing an eating disorder. (I fasted much more than the required 24 hours every two weeks.) And yet I still felt I was failing myself and my leaders and, by extension, God. In a culture that made

holiness about to-do and not-to-do lists, one focused on monitoring personal morality rather than allowing individuals to become the diverse people God made them to be, I put my energy into the pursuit of perfection and tried in vain to pull everyone else along with me.

But this was not everyone's experience. I learned from online discussions with other alumni that many of them lied on their weekly evaluations. I still can't imagine how they didn't fear hellfire.

A decade after my experience at the Honor Academy, I saw the Teen Mania ideal of a "confrontable, teachable spirit" crumble when alumni began raising concerns about the dangers of the curriculum. Mica Ringo, founder of the Honor Academy watchdog and support website Recovering Alumni, reported that Teen Mania's leaders had not responded well to the testimonials she collected. The third episode of the series includes a recording of a 2010 call between Ringo and the Honor Academy director, in which he completely fails to implement the lessons he taught us about how to receive confrontation, especially from a member of the Teen Mania community. Ringo gives examples of harms reported by participants in a Navy SEALs-inspired weekend boot camp called the Emotionally Stretching Opportunity of A Lifetime—harms that included panic attacks, hypothermia, and physical injuries. She asks, "How do you justify an event that causes so many injuries?"

The director says he's never heard most of the complaints. Then he reverses victim and offender and accuses Ringo: "I mean, what would you say is your heart intent, what are you hoping to accomplish both in this call, in your site? To me, you're just out to get me or something, I guess."

Teen Mania leaders refused to significantly address the issues, so Ringo brought them to the media. After a damning report from a local KLTV news outlet and the MSNBC mini-documentary *Mind Over Mania*, Teen Mania re-evaluated ESOAL. Even then, its leaders offered no public apology, and when the event was eventually canceled, they were defensive. In a letter to Honor Academy alumni, the director blamed the "secular media" for failing to "even try to understand" or do their "due diligence [to] research our event properly. . . . So, this life-changing 90-hour event has been greatly mischaracterized and has resulted in the entire HA internship year being publicly maligned."

In the third episode, former Teen Mania participant Liz Boltz Ranfeld observes, “If they had just apologized, there were so many people who would have never continued telling their stories.” But “there was no willingness to do that, and that solidified into, ‘Oh, really? You’re going to deny that this happened to me?’”

Many of us are still longing for those apologies, the humble recognition that the people who led Teen Mania have heard our growing collective confrontations. But the organization’s leadership model left little room for confrontation of the people at the top. Teen Mania fell apart in 2025. By that point I had recognized that the scrutiny we were taught there didn’t fertilize our growth in blossoming into the unique individuals God had created us to be. It kept us in line and productive for the ministry machine.

That super-cringe year-end conversation served as an impromptu intervention. It was a gentle confrontation, a bitter supplement that offered me some restoration. I reached the end of my Honor Academy year and realized that I didn’t want to take this highly vigilant faith with me. I began my undergraduate studies at a Christian college with a little more elasticity in the fabric of faith I had so meticulously woven. My unraveling of Teen Mania’s rigid teachings would take decades, but those years in more spacious dorms with a more spacious theology provided me with an early foundation for healing. And I was grateful, when my roommate’s dishes piled up, to know that I should approach her casually, hands in my pockets, allowing her to save face, just as my friends around the gingham-clothed table had allowed me to do.