

[<<Back](#)



Investigation under way in Redmond wilderness camp death

Posted: Sep 2, 2009 06:21 PM PDT



Autopsy results awaited as a mother grieves

By Nina Mehlhaf, KTVZ.COM

A Portland mother is talking about the death of her teenage son at a Redmond-based wilderness school. But it's not the first time this has happened at camps here.

Sergey Blashchishena, 16, died Friday during his first hike with Redmond's SageWalk Wilderness School.

His death in a remote area more than 60 miles east of Bend may be purely medical, or it may be related to something else, and that uncertainty has officials in many different agencies waiting.

Blashchishena was depressed and dropped out of school last year, his mother Lyudmila says.

Going a different route, she says they chose SageWalk Wilderness of Redmond, which teaches troubled kids stability and values through the outdoors.

"I was trying to encourage him," Lyudmila told our Fox news affiliate in Portland. "I was trying to tell him, education is very important to him, but he didn't want to hear any of that."

On Friday, Sergey's first day, he was hiking with five other classmates in Lake County. Lyudmila says she was told he vomited, then collapsed, died and couldn't be resuscitated. He was athletic and had just passed a physical the day before.

"They checked him, they did a medical exam for him, they allowed him to go to this activity," she said.

The camp has now had its permit to use BLM land suspended, pending autopsy results.

BLM officials say they're waiting on the sheriff's and state Department of Human Services investigations into the death and if the camp was in any way negligent or didn't follow state regulations.

"It's a fairly normal practice for us to temporarily suspend a license until we have more information and we prefer to err on the side of protecting youth," said Carol Benkowsky, district manager of the BLM's Lakeview District.

There are four wilderness therapy schools in Central Oregon. Back in 2000, a 15-year-old Washington boy died on an outing with the now-defunct Bend wilderness school Obsidian Trails.

A teacher held him face-down after an outburst, but was never indicted on homicide charges. Two other students from the same school were arrested after escaping and stealing a car in 1999.

Nationally, 10 kids have died at schools like these, prompting a bill now going through Congress

that would tack on additional state and new federal safety regulations preventing child abuse.

SageWalk's parent company says it's not a boot camp, instead using therapists to get through to kids, not harsh words.

Sergey's tearful mom just wants to know what happened to her son: "It's hard. Yeah, he was a very strong child."

Lake County sheriff's officials say the autopsy results could take up to two weeks. In the meantime, SageWalk can legally continue to operate the school with its five other students on private lands only.

In response to questions from NewsChannel 21, Mike Bednarz, SageWalk's executive director, wrote to say that "SageWalk follows established best practices and protocols that may delay an incoming student from beginning a hike with the other students based on the results of their admissions history and physical but due to HIPAA regulations, I cannot comment on the specific history of this young man."

Asked about whether the participants are tested for the H1N1 (swine flu) virus, Bednarz added, "we are following the Deschutes County recommendation to not do H1N1 testing at this time, however our nurses have been educated about the symptoms to watch for."

The following statement came from SageWalk's parent firm, regarding the legislation now in Congress:

Aspen Education Group, which operates Oregon's Mount Bachelor Academy, New Leaf Academy and SageWalk Wilderness School, strongly believes that appropriate facility oversight and enforcement is necessary to prevent the abuse and neglect of adolescents in the care of all residential facilities. We support legislative efforts to provide strong, well-informed, state licensing requirements and the necessary local oversight to ensure compliance, while allowing providers of education and healthcare to offer these services in the most clinically effective and cost-efficient manner.

Aspen Education Group is committed to providing quality services for youth and families. For this reason, each of the aforementioned programs is currently licensed by the Oregon State Department of Health and Human Services. In addition, Mount Bachelor Academy is accredited by the Pacific Northwest Association of Independent Schools and the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools, New Leaf Academy is accredited by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and SageWalk is accredited by the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools.

It is our belief that H.R. 911 should broaden its list of exempted programs to include programs that are licensed by the state and accredited by either a regional or national accrediting body. For programs that are already licensed and accredited, the regulations of H.R. 911 are redundant, costly and add another layer of unnecessary oversight onto programs. The availability of quality treatment programs could be affected, leaving many families without the help they so desperately need.



All content © Copyright 2000 - 2009 WorldNow and KTVZ. All Rights Reserved.
For more information on this site, please read our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#).

□