

HEAL: SPECIAL REPORT

Communicating with Programs

Introduction—Brief History of HEAL

Angela Smith, HEAL HQ Coordinator and Co-Founder, lived in an abusive home environment in 1989. This led to her decision to commit suicide. In late winter of 1989, she took an entire bottle of anxiety medication she had been prescribed to deal with her stress and to assist with managing her ongoing health problems (ulcers) caused by that stress. She slept for over 36 hours. Upon waking, she knew she wanted to live and called her grandmother. Her grandmother then called her therapist for suggestions. Her grandmother's therapist recommended brief psychiatric hospitalization for Angela due to the suicide attempt. Angela agreed and entered Fairfax Psychiatric Hospital in Kirkland, WA. A couple of months later, it was the decision of the hospital that Angela was ready to return home. Angela Smith then asked if there was an alternative as she feared a return home meant returning to the abusive environment. The hospital showed Ms. Smith a video for Provo Canyon School. The video claimed that Provo Canyon School was a college preparatory therapeutic boarding school. Angela was sold on the concept that she would be focusing on education with helpful assistance from Provo Canyon. Upon arrival to that program, Ms. Smith became painfully aware that she had been misled by the video and that Provo Canyon School was not the "Facts of Life" boarding school that she had been led to believe it would be. In fact, Provo Canyon School revealed itself to be something ugly, cruel, inhumane, and terrifying. Ms. Smith was rescued from Provo Canyon School within 2 months of enrollment in that program.

From the date of the rescue, it took approximately 10 years for Ms. Smith to feel secure and confident again. In 1999, Ms. Smith was enrolled in Highline Community College and had recently purchased a home computer. She became familiar with the internet and decided to look up Provo Canyon School, assuming it would be closed. Upon realizing that the program was still open and still had much of the same staff and leadership, she decided to start writing about her experiences online and to set up a message board where Provo Canyon School survivors and families could exchange information. This was done through her website at www.beyondbusiness.net. After setting up the message forum, survivors from other programs started to post their experiences as well. And, Ms. Smith and her fellows realized that the problem wasn't just one or two programs. So, we started to dig and found a lot (over 2000 pages posted to the HEAL site alone) of information exposing RICO violations, rampant abuse, fraud, and even death of children in behavior modification programs. As responsible citizens, we decided it was time to take action.

In 2002, HEAL officially began as a student organization at the University of Washington. Since our inception, we have expanded and been represented in multiple states throughout the country. All of our coordinators are survivors of behavior modification programs and all of our parent support volunteers are parents who have had children enrolled in behavior modification programs. Our parent support volunteers rescued their children and have spoken out against the fraud and abuse they witnessed and/or experienced.

HEAL membership includes mental health professionals, medical professionals, attorneys, and most importantly, victims/survivors of the behavior modification industry with firsthand knowledge of what goes on behind closed doors and the difference between the public image projected by the marketing arm of the industry and the reality of what we experienced while under the control of the programs.

Program Concern #1—“HEAL Members Don’t Interview Programs Before Posting Articles/Information.” (This concern was most recently raised by Craig Rogers of Abundant Life Academy in January, 2011.)

This concern fails to take into consideration the fact that the GAO investigations and the firsthand experiences of HEAL volunteers repeatedly show a pattern of deception in the behavior modification industry. Based on these facts and ongoing issues with dishonesty by those in the industry, we feel it is futile and a waste of time to contact programs for their position. However, this hasn’t prevented us from trying. We have e-mailed and called many programs we are investigating with our concerns and questions. And, we receive no response or insulting responses. And, the responses from those in the industry reinforce our belief that such attempts are futile and a poor use of our time and resources.

This concern also fails to address the lack of transparency in the behavior modification industry. Behavior modification programs do not address the complaints and concerns raised about their practices. Industry websites (i.e. provocanyon.com, strugglingteens.com, abundantlifeacademy.com, etc.) do not address the complaints and concerns raised by their clients and former clients. And, they do not provide any public record of the complaints they receive. Behavior modification programs do not provide space for dissatisfied clients to share their dissatisfaction and only claim statements about themselves that have profit-promotional value for the programs. So, the programs themselves do not interview families and do not post accurate and balanced information about themselves through their own media. And, the programs do not post information about their methods and the scientific evidence of the effectiveness of those methods. In the least, these facts show that the programs are hypocritical. And, arguably, the facts also show that the programs are not interested in improving their services, but, only in improving their profit-margin.

Program Concern #2—“HEAL believes survivors and families.” (This concern was most recently raised by an Aspen Achievement Academy employee who contacted us on January 24th, 2011)

HEAL believes survivors and their families. HEAL believes court records. HEAL believes news reports. HEAL believes sworn testimony and official investigation findings. HEAL is survivors and their families and we believe ourselves and each other. And, we know programs lie and that that is a matter of public record.

We really don't have anything else to say about that concern because it seems absurd on its face. It would be like HEAL saying “don't believe anything the programs say” without providing any valid basis for disbelieving them. We provide a valid basis for disbelieving programs. However, the programs provide no valid basis for disbelieving dissatisfied clients and defrauded families.

Program Concern #3—“HEAL promotes a liberal agenda.” (This concern was most recently raised by Craig Rogers of Abundant Life Academy in January, 2011.)

HEAL is a non-partisan and ecumenical network of activists working on a number of social issues. These and similar complaints are lodged against HEAL to change the subject and avoid public scrutiny by changing the nature of the conversation. HEAL will not respond to arguments raised that have nothing to do with the issue at hand. In this instance, HEAL is genuinely concerned about fraud and abuse at Abundant Life Academy and similar programs. And, our concerns have been specified throughout our website(s). These concerns are not being addressed by the programs and instead of being open to honest discussion regarding the problems facing the behavior modification industry and its methods, the programs are attempting to discredit their victims to avoid facing the legitimate consequences of their practices.

Conclusion—Where do we go from here?

We believe we have handled this situation as reasonably as possible under the circumstances. We have contacted and assisted other families in contacting the proper authorities (licensing agencies, accrediting agencies, law enforcement, child protective services, and other government agencies/offices). We have often been given the run around by officials who pass the proverbial buck to the next office in line or claim conflict of interest due to the fact that some officials actually own programs in the industry (i.e. Sen. Buttars of Utah). And, we continue to contact the proper authorities and to assist other families in doing so in hope that there will be enough public outcry for something to be done to protect children and families from fraud and abuse.

We have submitted statements to Congress regarding issues with legislation and recommendations we have for improving the laws to protect children and families

from fraud and abuse. We have also filed and will again file initiatives throughout the United States to improve children's rights and welfare.

We have responded to reasonable and unreasonable concerns and questions raised by the behavior modification industry and its supporters/benefactors (i.e. referral industry). And, we have not received any reasonable response to the concerns and questions we have submitted for and/or to them.

The most striking thing that comes out of all of these exchanges is that the programs never attempt to use de-escalation techniques, even when dealing with adults with legitimate concerns. Instead, the programs resort to manipulation, lies, and confrontational and baseless attacks to avoid being held accountable for their own misdeeds. While it is possible that those in the industry have been dealing with "troubled teens" for so long that they themselves have become identical to the population they claim to serve (based on their statements about their clients, not any belief held by HEAL), it is more likely that those running these programs have always been liars and manipulators and unable to see anything but their own reflection in the eyes of others. And, regardless of which of the above alternatives proves most accurate, we believe that such individuals are incapable of providing legitimate help to families in crisis. And, recommend a moratorium on residential and wilderness programs unless and until effective regulations are in place to insure the well-being of children and families. Whether such a moratorium is enacted through an Executive Order by President Obama or through some other means, we believe it is imperative for the health of our families and our nation.