

COPPER CANYON ACADEMY

RIMROCK (NEAR LAKE MONTEZUMA), AZ

*These events occurred under former ownership (**not Aspen Education Group**)

**Change in ownership does not necessary mean a change in policy, practice, or staff. Always thoroughly investigate any program to which you consider subjecting your child!

Everything I am submitting to HEAL regarding my experience at Copper Canyon Academy is true to the best of my knowledge.

My name is Melanie Lenihan, and I worked as a staff member at Copper Canyon Academy (located in Lake Montezuma, Arizona) for about 2 months during 2002. I resigned from my position at Copper Canyon Academy due to the abuses at this program. Here is my testimonial of the abuses I witnessed while I was there. If you would like to contact me with any questions, I would be more than happy to answer you. My email address is raku_vessel@yahoo.com.

I will start by listing what I observed from the list of warning signs of abuse (from the HEAL website (<http://www.heal-online.org/warn.htm>)), and I will also comment on each one.

1. Verbal and/or written communication between the client and family members is prohibited, restricted or monitored.

Yes, communication was restricted, especially at the lower levels of the program.

4. The program houses clients in foster homes or host homes instead of allowing them to reside with their parents.

Yes, the girls were required to live with host families once they reached the upper levels of the program.

6. The client is denied access to a telephone.

I never saw a girl talking on the phone with family or friends, so I assumed it wasn't allowed. Maybe there were rare cases, or maybe it was allowed once the girls went on to live with host families, but I'm not certain.

10. Clients are restrained or otherwise physically prevented from leaving the facility.

The girls were locked into the building at night. When I worked there, 2 different girls ran away and were caught (forced to return). I wasn't present when they were caught, so I don't know how much force was used.

13. The program inflicts physical punishments on clients such as exercising, running, food restrictions, and cleaning.

I saw a couple of instances where the staff told the girls to run laps on the track as a punishment for being too noisy at mealtime. And cleaning was the typical punishment for just about any kind of misbehavior. They referred to them as "work hours", and staff handed them out very easily. In order for a girl to see movies on the weekend, she had to have no "work hours" at all during the previous week. The same was true for being able to rise up a level.

14. Reading materials are prohibited or restricted. The school had to approve anything that a girl asked to read.

15. The facility does not have a clearly visible sign outside the building stating the name of the program.

Yes, true. I always wondered why this was the case.

16. Clients must submit "chain of commands" or any other such requests for basic needs such as clothes, shoes, personal items and medical care.

Yes, I remember seeing such lists.

17. The program is run or staffed by persons who lack adequate experience or credentials.

I worked there as a staff member, and I must say that I lacked experience and credentials. I do have a B.A., but it's in Studio Art (not in education or psychology or something related to this job). At the time I was hired, I also had quite a bit of experience working with young people, but no experience working with troubled teens in particular. I was expecting some sort of training from the school, but it was never offered. As far as the other staff members, they generally had even less education and experience than I had.

25. The program does not allow clients to follow their religion of choice.

Also, I remember a girl telling me that her therapist insisted that her religion (Scientology) is a cult. I'm not sure whether or not he wouldn't allow her to follow it, but he did try to interfere with her personal religious views.

28. Medication is recommended, prescribed, approved or dispensed by anyone other than a medical doctor (MD).

Certain staff members (non-doctors) dispensed medication to the girls.

36. Clients on any phase/level are forbidden to speak to other clients.

When girls first arrived and were on level one, they were not permitted to speak to other girls who were on level one. Also, if they dropped back down to level one (or a negative level), the same was true.

The following section is a list of several other abuses that I remember observing, listed in no particular order.

* Many of the staff members were very rude to the girls. They seemed to think the girls were the "enemy" and that you must treat them with hostility in order to make them obedient. They saw how I spoke to the girls respectfully, and I know this was not okay with them. They treated me badly as a result, worse than I have ever been treated at any job.

* Girls were expected to learn all the rules within 3 days, and after that point they were responsible (and could be given "work hours" etc. if they broke rules). But there were so many rules, and not all of them were listed in the book. I brought this up to some of the staff (including supervisors), and they said the girls should be able to learn the rules from word of mouth. But I couldn't even learn all the rules! And I had trouble enforcing them when I didn't know them because they weren't all written down. The staff members seemed to think I should just somehow know them. But my opinion is that in a system like theirs (in any authoritarian kind of system), they like to keep the rules somewhat a mystery so that people will break them. The people who run these kinds of systems want to punish others!

* Girls were occasionally put on silence, meaning no speaking except for things like "I need to use the bathroom". Sometimes the silencing lasted for several days.

* I heard at least one staff member make fun of a lesbian girl about her sexuality.

* I read in the handbook that girls could be sent to the school for problems such as depression, drug addiction, difficulty in school, and quite an assortment of other things. We staff members were never told what problems each girl had when she arrived (unless other staff members knew, but nobody ever told me). So one day I asked a staff supervisor about one particular girl. I wasn't sure if anyone was willing to tell me anything or not, but I figured it was worth a try. But the staff supervisor seemed very angry at my question, and went off for a while about how all the girls deserved to be there. She spoke of it as if this boarding school was a punishment for naughty behavior. So I wondered, does this woman think that suffering with depression deserves punishment? Did she realize that some girls were there simply because they were depressed? Of course, I don't think any of the girls deserved what they got in that place, no matter what they had done in order to end up there.

* A girl who attempted to run away was made to sleep on a mattress on the bathroom floor for a few days. She was also dropped to a negative level, which meant she could have only one shirt, one pair of

pants, one bra, one pair of socks, and one pair of underwear. The poor girl was on her period at the time, which must have made it even more uncomfortable, and I remember wondering if they would give her new clothes if she happened to bleed through them. I figured they wouldn't, and I already knew at that point that they didn't appreciate questions or suggestions from me.

* One day when all the girls were running the track (as a punishment for being too noisy at a mealtime), one of the girls asked me if I could go and get her inhaler (she obviously needed it). I said yes, of course, and went to go get it. Then the staff supervisor stepped in to tell me not to give her inhaler to her (she was quite rude to me, too, I might add). So I asked her at what point we should give a girl her inhaler, and the woman replied something like "when she's huffing and puffing and her lips are turning blue". She said it with such malice, too.

* The girls all had to read "Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives", by Dr. Laura Schlessinger, and write a report on it. I wanted to give the girls another viewpoint, so I brought in an article critiquing Dr. Laura. The staff supervisors found out about this, and they brought me into the office to tell me I was not permitted to do such a thing. It was obvious that they didn't want the girls to be exposed to viewpoints other than those held by the school. No, they wanted them to swallow whatever they taught them, no questions asked, no independent thinking whatsoever!

**PLEASE DON'T SEND YOUR DAUGHTER(S) TO COPPER
CANYON ACADEMY!!!**