



FamilyLightsm

A Service of Thomas J. Croke & Associates, Inc.



Tom's Blog -- May, 2010

FamilyLightsm: Successor to Bridge to Understandingsm

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Enough, Already! -- Aspen Again

Home

Individual Services

Programs and More

[Directory](#)

[Program Reviews](#)

[Q Responses](#)

[Tom's Blog <<](#)

[Topics of Interest](#)

[Search guide](#)

[Parent support](#)

[Virtual community](#)

["Bridge" Archive](#)

[Contributors](#)

[Q&A](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Notes](#)

[Recommended Reading](#)

[Links](#)

Professional Interest

About Us

Contact Us

Site Map

On Tuesday, May 11, 2010, I received a phone call from a management person in the Aspen organization. This is unusual. Aspen officials don't usually phone me. But this is a person I knew and trusted. She knew I did not like her employer. She also knew I had the highest regard for her. The message: New Leaf of North Carolina was closing. [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) had decided that only one program was needed in the organization serving the market of New Leaf. The North Carolina program would close and the property used to upgrade the program for Aspergers kids. The girls (and their parents) to whom [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) had committed to see them through the treatment process would need to relocate. But now [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) saw what they believe is an opportunity to increase their profit margins, so they will disrupt the lives of the girls currently enrolled at New Leaf.

I no longer believe that it would be a responsible action for any professional referring person or any parent or any other person to place enroll any person or oneself in any facility operated by or affiliated in any way with [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#). FamilyLightsm now solidly recommends against use of any such program, school, or facility. This includes Wellspring Weight Loss Academies. **(This does NOT refer to Wellspring in Bethlehem Connecticut, which is not affiliated with Aspen.)**

It appears to me, after hearing this, that [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) is concerned only about its profit margin and will subordinate the interest of the people in their schools and treatment centers toward that end. I was naïve. I never should have been surprised. Several weeks ago I posted on our website, in our review of [Aspen Education](#), the following:

[CRC Health Group](#), controlling the Aspen brand name, is not just a for-profit organization but it is owned by a private investment firm [Bain Capital](#) with a fiduciary responsibility to maximize return on investment. The reality is that the best care in therapeutic facilities is not necessarily the care that produces the greatest return on investment. We would like to hear a commitment directly from [Bain Capital](#) that they have directed [CRC Health Group](#) to provide the highest quality of care they can, observing that while short-term financial gains might result from taking shortcuts, the long term best financial performance will result from delivering the highest quality services with the highest standards of ethics.

When I posted that, I naively assumed that [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) actually could make that kind of commitment and live by it. I thought that because there were (and still are) essentially good programs, managed by competent caring people, we could place confidence in some such programs. New Leaf of North Carolina was one such program. It was under the very capable leadership of Catherine "Cat" Jennings, one of the very best of the best in this business. It was a superior quality program.

About three weeks prior to the phone call I just referred to (on May 11), I had spoken by phone with Cat Jennings, being very honest about my concerns about [Aspen/ CRC Health](#)

[Group/ Bain Capital](#). I said, "Cat, I am still willing to support New Leaf NC, but here is my concern. I could refer a young lady to your program tomorrow, based upon my confidence in you. Then in two weeks [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) could terminate your employment and the girl would be committed to that program, while the reason for confidence in it was gone." She replied that it could not happen. Three weeks later all of their girls are being uprooted and the program is closing.

To be clear, while we were saddened by other closings of other Aspen programs, we could rationalize them as not confirming this kind of value system. We were told Cedars was running extreme losses that were not sustainable and there was no way to turn that around. Same with Excel Academy in Texas. We did not like how the shutdown was handled at Cedars but we gave Aspen the benefit of the doubt. Mt. Bachelor and Sagewalk were closed by order of the State of Oregon without due process.

In the case of Mt. Bachelor, if press reports were accurate, I was (to put it mildly) puzzled by the apparent willingness of [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) to allow procedures to be in place at Mt. Bachelor which were the kinds of procedures that had motivated Congressman Miller's push for tighter regulation of the industry. We had questions about the judgment of a company that would have allowed themselves to be vulnerable to that.

So while we were [highly critical](#) of [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) over that, we again gave the benefit of the doubt as to how this concern might affect suitability of higher quality programs operated by [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#). We no longer believe it is responsible to give the benefit of the doubt, after the choice by the company voluntarily to disrupt the lives of the very vulnerable girls they had committed to care for -- girls enrolled in one [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#)'s highest quality schools.

[Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#) complained bitterly about the disruption to the students at [Mt. Bachelor Academy](#) when the [State of Oregon shut that school down](#). But by choice, they now do the same thing to the New Leaf students for the sake of a few dollars profit.

To our dismay, superior professionals, Karen Fitzhugh, Frank Bartolomeo, Catherine Jennings, Jim Dredge, and John Singleton are either either gone from Aspen or have been taken from the assignment where they had proven their effectiveness. Marc Dornfeld, Patty Evans, Jack Kline and the people who made the decision to close this program remain in their positions. We think this speaks directly to the value system that drives [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#). We think this tells us why we should not trust this company with our children.

We do not want this to be interpreted as a boycott where we would drop the concern if Aspen were to take corrective action, i.e. reversing the decision to close New Leaf of North Carolina. That is not what we are doing. We simply do not believe these are appropriate venues for kids (or adults), based upon the recent behavior of the management at [Aspen/ CRC Health Group/ Bain Capital](#). Of course we would consider changing our view if policy changes and personnel changes were to occur. We would want reason for confidence that the profit motivation would not in the future lead to decisions detrimental to the students/ clients/ program residents. We fear that is unlikely with the present management at [CRC Health Group](#) and so long as [Bain Capital](#) manages [Aspen](#) and [CRC Health Group](#) for short term gain and appear not to consider the proper treatment of the population served in their facilities.

Tom Croke

[**Review of Aspen Education Group**](#)

[**Aspen Marketing**](#)

[**Opening of Lake House Academy, serving population that was served**](#)

[by New Leaf of North Carolina](#)

[Return to Tom's Blog Index](#)

[Aspen's announcement about the closing of New Leaf of North Carolina](#)

Feedback is invited. We will publish feedback in good taste, consistent with our standards. Email FamilyLightResponse@yahoo.com

Disclaimer: *No program review, no matter how positive, is a blanket endorsement. No criticism is a blanket condemnation. When we express our level of confidence in a school or program, that is our subjective opinion with which others might reasonably disagree. When we assert something as fact, we have done our best to be accurate, but we cannot guarantee that all of our information is accurate and up to date. When we address compliance with our guidelines, you need to remember that these are only OUR guidelines -- not guidelines from an official source. We have also set the bar very high, and do not expect any school or program to be in total compliance. It is not appropriate to draw a conclusion of impropriety (or even failure to live up to conventional wisdom) from our lack of confidence in a school or program or from less than perfect conformity to our guidelines. Some will say we expect too much. **Readers are responsible for verifying accuracy of information supplied here prior to acting upon it. We are not responsible for inaccuracies.***

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