

From: H.E.

Sent: Friday, January 20, 2006 4:58 PM

To: heal@heal-online.org

Subject: My rights were violated by Aspen Achievement Academy

I hope this helps.

Everything in my statement is true, I give HEAL permission to use my statement. I ask that any parent thinking about enrolling their child in The Aspen Achievement program in Loa Utah, please reconsider. As a former student of the program myself, I did not see any of the literature provided to my parents until after my return from the program. After the initial review of videotape, and several pamphlets provided by the program I was shocked. The program did not accurately portray itself. According to advertisements for the Aspen Achievement Academy, the program resembled a rugged and therapeutic summer camp experience. In reality this could not have been farther than the truth.

It has been nearly twelve years since I spent those two months in the Utah wilderness, and my experience still haunts me to this day. The extensive neglect and abuse that my fellow students and I experienced was unacceptable. My parents were shocked when I came home and they saw the evidence in my backpack, and heard my stories.

I'll never forget the morning of May 11th, 1994. It's a date that will haunt me for the rest of my life. Two strangers awaked me at 5 am. They ordered me to get up and get dressed because I was going to Utah. I told them I couldn't go to Utah; I had to go to school that day! It turned out I had no choice. After a lengthy struggle I found myself forced onto a second rate airplane (who's ever heard of "Morrissey" airlines anyway) bound for Salt Lake City. It remains one of the most emotionally devastating and difficult things I have ever been through.

I remember before the program even started, they took us to a consular, or maybe he was a psychiatrist in Provo Utah to be evaluated. One of the worst moments in my life was when he looked me in the eye and told me that he did not believe that I was a good candidate for the program. He said he I seemed like a relatively normal and stable teenager, but that he was going to recommend that I attend despite this. He said that he thought the program would be good for anyone, even himself. He also told me that my parents had agreed to pay \$23,000 for my time in the desert. I don't know where that money went, because it certainly did not go to proper care and feeding of my fellow students and I.

We were starving in Utah; I lost over 20 pounds. We simply were not provided wit adequate amounts of food. Often times we were given no food at all, or forced to hike, exhausted for many miles before any food was provided. On a good day, in the mornings we were able to eat half a cup of cold instant oatmeal, and then at night if we

were lucky we could eat the same amount of cooked potatoes and rice. If we could not start a fire this food was consumed raw.

Furthermore, the healthcare was unacceptable. There were three specific instances that come to mind concerning this subject. The first concerns my knees. I was born with knee problems (a tendency for my kneecaps to dislocate). During my time with Aspen my knees dislocated twice. This was a preexisting condition, and in no way created by Aspen. However, after each incident I was allowed to rest for a few minutes and then was soon forced to hike on the injury. As a result I have had persistent problems to this day. In fact, a couple of months ago I finally opted for surgery. The surgeon found extensive scar tissue and damage. For the last month I also walked on what felt to be a broken toe. I was never examined, so I can't be sure, but the pain was excruciating for several weeks.

At one point I contracted the stomach flu during the program. I spent three days hiking and vomiting. Eventually after I had finally fainted several times from the exhaustion, medical help was brought in. This was not an acceptable response.

During my two months there, I was allowed to bathe only twice, both times in the same mud and cow filled stream that we drank from. The second bath came at the end of the program, right before our parents came. Before they saw us, we had to wash and change into fresh clothes. My Mom didn't see the tattered truth of what I really wore until we were back home. I remember her crying when she did. As a student I had no rights, I was not even treated like a human. I was a prisoner.

Often times we drank from streams with high sulfur content that made us very sick. Sore often than not the water in my jug was brown, with brine shrimp swimming in it. I'll never forget the feeling of them squirming on my tongue as I tried to swallow the gritty water, always to the sound of a counselor "come on SUCK IT DOWN!" We had to drink it; we had no choice.

As a member of Aspen Group 211, I saw a thirteen year old girl turn purple and then blue as the staff sat by waiting for her to get herself up off the ground and keep walking. We walked in circles, up and down mountains, in the heat, in the cold and in the dark. We were always lost. For most of the time we carried a pack made of a blue tarp with seat belt material for straps. It was painful and awkward.

My hiking boots were new at the start of the program, and by the end the tread on the bottoms had worn down completely, they were flat. We could not know where we were or how long we would be there. There were "no future questions" allowed. I remember walking along sheer cliffs with no safety ropes or harnesses, eating from dirty and rancid dishes, and having to use our bare hands to dig up and "relocate" human "waste" on several occasions.

On my high school transcripts there are credits for classes from "Wayne County High School". These are really from my time at Aspen. These "classes" consisted of the

completion a series of “curriculum” packets. They were really just confusing worksheets, that had obviously been typed out by one of the Aspen staff members.

There was a wonderful older man by the name of “Levoy” who was supposed to be the teacher. He would come and visit rarely, and when he did it was never for an actual academic lesson. I do remember that never the less, his visits were one of the few pleasant things about the whole experience.

Actually, the academic instruction was a responsibility delegated to myself, and another one of the older students. We of course did not understand anything included in the curriculum anymore than the other kids, yet were the ones expected to “teach”. They told us it was a reward, because we were always the first ones packed up and crushing the coals from the fire. It seemed like a strange reward to me.

Aspen markets itself as a “therapeutic” environment. There was very little actual “therapy” involved. Once a week, for half an hour a “therapist” would come speak with us. This was an occasion we looked forward to because for one, the therapist would bring each of us an apple to eat, and for two, it got us out of having to hike for a couple of hours. These therapy sessions were too brief and far between to be of any help. The only other mention of therapy came each morning when one of the 19-21 year old staff members would ask us to use a single word to describe how we felt for that day. The “therapy” was a joke.

Apparently the “therapist” had periodic phone conversations with my parents. I don’t know what they could have talked about; the therapist knew little of me, or my daily experiences in the program. My main connection to my parents was the letters that we wrote back and forth. The staff had to censor them all. I never sent or received a sealed envelope. I had to be careful about what I wrote. I tried to tell my parents what was happening, but it was hard. When I got home I found out that they warned our parents that we would exaggerate and not to believe our first hand descriptions of the program.

To this day we rarely if ever talk about Utah. About once every few years I casually bring up the subject. They never do. I still have a hard time finding the ability to forgive them in my heart. I hated them like never before during the program. I was not happy when they arrived in Utah for the last 2 days of the program, nor did our relationship improve once we got home. It got worse, and to this day I still hold a grudge because of the experience.

Before I went to Utah, I was a relatively good kid. I was seventeen years old. I had tried smoking cigarettes, tried smoking pot (and hated it) and had sex with two people. When compared to my peers I was fairly normal. Aspen didn’t care; they’ll take anyone whose parents will pay. After I came back from the program I had lost all sense of self worth and self-respect. I decided I didn’t care; it no longer mattered if I continued to resist the bad things in life, because I had already been punished. Within a month of my return I had tried hard-core drugs such as Crystal Meth, become a heavy smoker, had

a lot of casual unprotected sex, and even had an affair with a man in his late twenties. Before Aspen I wouldn't have done any of this. For many years after the experience I was tormented by nightmares about Utah and my time there. I've been back to the state, and even out into the desert where the program was held, all in an effort to make peace with the memories. Slowly, over time I did recover. I think my parents are still paying off the loan they took out to pay for Aspen. I wish they had used the money to help me in school instead.

Eventually I recovered, and got on a good track. But, I feel that had I not been sent to Aspen, I would have become a healthy productive adult much sooner.

In recent years I have heard that the program has been altered slightly. Apparently students now progress through the program at their own rate. It is no longer an issue to wait for everyone in the group to complete a task. Maybe this helps to control the animosity and resentment that existed in my group. Still, no matter how many changes are made in the program, or how many favorable accounts they post on their web site, I would NEVER recommend this program to anyone.

Now, despite the "Aspen Experience" twelve years later I have been able to successfully graduate from college, find a healthy love relationship, a job as a teacher, and even (very recently) quit smoking. I have become the person my parents had hoped I would be. But, I still have nightmares of Utah. I remember Aspen T-shirts that read, "You'll go to Hell and Back". They were half right, I went there, but it took nearly a decade for me to make it back.