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## Killer Camps: Another Troubled Teen Dies

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2009

filed under: [tween & teen logic](#)

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**Hear from a mom who is determined to make wilderness intervention programs safe for our children.**

**Gina Kaysen Fernandes:** An investigation into the death of a 16-year-old Oregon boy has temporarily shut down a wilderness [school for troubled teens](#) in Redmond, Oregon. Sergey Blashchishen of Portland dropped dead on August 28 while hiking in rugged terrain in a remote area. Sergey's mother told the media her son vomited, collapsed, and died despite efforts to revive him. Sergey voluntarily signed up for the boot camp run by SageWalk Wilderness School after his life started heading in the wrong direction. But instead of gaining the life skills he so desperately needed, Sergey died on his first day of camp.



KTVZ.com

This shocking incident is strikingly similar to [what happened to 14-year-old Matthew Meyer](#), whose mother, Crystal Manganaro, shared her heartbreaking story with momlogic.

Matthew died of excessive heat stroke in 2004 after [hiking](#) for hours in a wilderness intervention program. The camp, called Lone Star Expeditions, is now closed, but was previously owned by the California-based Aspen Education Group. The same parent company owns SageWalk Wilderness School.

Crystal says when she heard about Sergey's death, "I just fell apart." Crystal has become a leading activist in the effort to regulate the [troubled teen industry](#). This billion-dollar industry operates under the radar, without government oversight or intervention.

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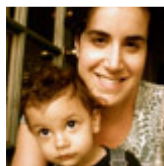
These privately owned and operated facilities are often exempt from state licensing and regulation. SageWalk operates on federal forestland -- and so did Lone Star when it was open. But the Feds claim no responsibility for the actions of these organizations. Crystal wants to change that. "If they're allowed to operate on federal land, then it's a federal problem," says Crystal, who went to Washington, D.C., in March to plead her case to politicians.

The facts surrounding Sergey's death remain tightly guarded. Crystal knows it could take years for his parents to learn the truth, but she suspects the lack of adequately trained medical staff is likely to blame. A report by Timothy Kempfe of Adventures Experiences, Inc., a wilderness camp owner with 38 years of experience, revealed the "hazardous and unhygienic conditions" he witnessed at Aspen-owned Lone Star. Kempfe reviewed the facility following Matthew's death. In his report, he wrote, "In this case, it is evident that neither the company nor the individuals working for this company knew how to provide the proper standards of care. The company had improper equipment, inadequately trained field staff, and an inappropriate form of discipline, which neglects the standards of care for providing a safe environment."

The Aspen Education Group stands behind its reputation for providing "quality care for youth and families for over two decades." In a written statement to momlogic, Aspen addressed the Oregon wilderness camp tragedy: "SageWalk considers student safety its number one priority and takes this incident very seriously. Over the course of its 12-year history, SageWalk has adhered to the highest standards of care and currently meets or exceeds all industry and state standards. We have extended our sincerest condolences to the family, as well as resources to help them through their loss," wrote spokeswoman Kristen Hayes.

The Aspen Education Group owns more facilities in Utah, Idaho, and North Carolina.

Crystal says she's frustrated that her cry for help to crack down on this unregulated industry is falling on deaf ears. "They don't care about the kids, they care about the income," says Crystal, who is urging politicians to enact federal legislation that would make these camps safer for kids. "I feel like I've hit a brick wall," says Crystal.



Gina Kaysen Fernandes is an award winning documentary producer and a former TV news producer/writer. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and son.

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I am sad to read about yet another teen dying at one of these facilities. I wonder how many more have to die before anything is done about it? How are these places allowed to be run without any regulation?

- Cheryl

Posted 09/25/09 06:57 AM

Sagewalk is accredited by state and independent organizations. To say they were operating 'under the radar' is a lie. Sergey's death sounds very strange. Most people don't hike and die in 80 degree weather. It may have been even cooler because of the climate they were hiking in. Since it was his first day there is a good chance he was detoxing from the drugs he possibly had been taking before coming to the program. Alternatively he may have been on some heavy behavior modifying medication. If you do some research you'll find most kids that die in these programs die within the first 2 weeks. It should be mandatory for these programs to provide a two week detox and physical fitness program prior to entering the rigors of wilderness camping. The staff also need to be aware that new students need time to adjust to the work of hiking with a 30-40lb backpack.

- Jacob W

Posted 09/25/09 02:10 PM

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