

## Ever unconventional, long controversial

**The school's history is a twisted one, involving atypical therapy methods and company mergers, good intentions and success stories, but also cases of what some, including the state, call abuse. The story behind the academy's closure.**

By Keith Chu / *The Bulletin*

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An era ended when Mount Bachelor Academy closed Nov. 3, following allegations of child abuse by the state Department of Human Services.

The private school for troubled teens, located 26 miles east of Prineville, was one of the last of its kind — a school whose methods originated in the Synanon self-help group, which was widely considered a cult by the late 1970s.

It's also a school that counts hundreds, if not thousands, of devoted graduates and parents who swear that Mount Bachelor Academy put their children on the right track, or even saved their lives.

And for years, MBA was a flagship of Aspen Education Group, a company that grew to become one of the biggest providers of therapeutic, emotional-growth and weight-loss facilities in the U.S. In 2006, that company was swallowed by an even bigger fish, CRC Health, an arm of the private investment firm Bain Capital.

### *The roots*

According to veteran educational consultants, Mount Bachelor Academy was one of the last schools founded on a therapy for troubled teens that originated at the Southern California school called CEDU.

Three educational consultants, including a former CEDU staff member, said the school's founder, Mel Wasserman, drew from Synanon's ideas when he started the school.

Synanon began in the 1950s as a Southern California group designed to help "dope fiends" and drug addicts who didn't have other options for treatment at the time.



Rob Kerr / The Bulletin file photo

The academy's better days ... Many students and parents attest to Mount Bachelor Academy's successes. In 2003, The Bulletin interviewed 18-year-old Pedro Macias and his mother, Sally, of Mexico City, on graduation day. The "old" Pedro had been kicked out of school and had a problem with marijuana. But after his time at the academy, "it's an incredible change," his mother said. "He was ... unpleasant to be around — a monster. Now he's back to himself."



The Bulletin file photo

The private school's campus, east of Prineville.

In a 1977 article, Time magazine describes the early Synanon method as a “no-nonsense, self-help program that included the ‘game,’ a rugged encounter session in which participants acted out their inmost hostilities. Learning the truth about themselves supposedly helped them stay off drugs or booze.”

The group, according to Time and other contemporary news accounts, eventually required its female members to shave their heads, men to get vasectomies and married couples to swap partners. In 1980, three members of the group pleaded no contest to charges of attempted murder for putting a rattlesnake in the mailbox of an attorney who had sued the group. No one suggests that any of the most unseemly aspects of Synanon were ever part of the CEDU curriculum.

San Francisco educational consultant Alice Jackson said she was impressed by CEDU the first time she visited the school, in 1974. Wasserman and his wife were caring for dozens of “kids off the street,” many of whom had serious substance abuse problems.

“I was first of all astounded by the magical personality that (Wasserman) had,” Jackson said. “I had great admiration for his dedication for these kids.”

Lon Woodbury was admissions director at CEDU for several years and now is an independent education consultant in Idaho. Woodbury said Wasserman “watered down” the Synanon ideas for the school.

“Mel Wasserman was influenced by Synanon, and so used the confrontation model watered down quite a bit in the founding in CEDU,” Woodbury said. “It continued to be watered down and was much less confrontational than it was in the early years.”

The abuse allegations at Mount Bachelor Academy by the Oregon Department of Human Services hearkened back to the earlier practices at emotional growth schools, Woodbury said.

“Some of the things the state had said surprised me because those were things they were doing years ago when it was more acceptable,” he said.

The Oregon Department of Human Services complaint against MBA found that some of the therapeutic methods at the school were “punitive, humiliating, degrading and



Bowman Museum and Crook County Historical Society

## The academy's owners

Mount Bachelor Academy is one of more than 30 facilities owned by Aspen Education Group and designed to treat troubled teens. In 2006, CRC Health, which owns more than 145 schools, clinics and camps, purchased Aspen.

### *CRC's Oregon facilities*

In Central Oregon:

- Mount Bachelor Academy (Prineville)
- SageWalk (Redmond)
- New Leaf Oregon (Bend)
- NorthStar Center (Bend)

In the Portland area:

- Burnside Clinic
- Belmont Clinic
- Alder Clinic
- Tigard Clinic

In Southern Oregon:

- Medford Clinic

Source: CRC Health Group

... But years of troubles

1988: Mount Bachelor Academy is founded by College Health Enterprises, a group of hospitals in Southern California, at the former Mark's Creek Lodge, pictured at right, in the Ochoco National Forest.

1997: Aspen Education Group is spun off into an independent company by College Health Enterprises. The company includes Mount Bachelor Academy and about five other schools.

1998: First allegations of abuse at Mount Bachelor Academy. The school is cleared of wrongdoing by the state Department of Human Services.

1998: Aspen Education Group purchases NorthStar Center, a Bend independent- living facility for young adults 18-25. The center had operated independently since 1991.

2004: New Leaf Academy, a girls-only boarding school in

traumatizing,” including “sexualized role play in front of staff and peers, requiring students to say derogatory phrases about themselves in front of staff and peers, requiring students to re-enact past physical abuse in front of staff and peers, permitting staff to engage in the usage of derogatory names, phrases and ridicule of students and deprivation of sleep.”

Wasserman died in 2002, according to Woodbury’s newsletter on therapeutic schools, Woodbury Reports.

### *Starting out in Central Oregon*

In 1987, College Health Enterprises, a group of Southern California hospitals, decided to start an emotional-growth boarding school for teenagers, somewhere in Central Oregon.

According to a history of MBA on the school’s Web site, the school tried to start in Powell Butte, but “a few difficulties with permits” led founder Linda Houghton to locate at the former Mark’s Creek Lodge, in the Ochoco National Forest.

Woodbury, Jackson and education consultants Doug Bodin and Tom Croke all agreed that CEDU methods were the basis for early emotional growth methods at Mount Bachelor Academy.

Jackson is listed on the MBA history page as one of the consultants who was an important source of student referrals in the school’s early days. She endorsed the school at the time, Jackson said, but gradually grew to believe the model needed to be updated.

“At that time, the programs were very much about behavior management, and they were rigid in their length of stay,” Jackson said. “Some of those things that happened in that model were not what we would think would be OK for kids (today).”

Croke, a consultant in Pennsylvania who runs the Web site FamilyLight.com, agreed that the methods pioneered at CEDU-style schools, including sleep deprivation and confrontational therapy, are now considered inappropriate. But that was less clear in the early days of the industry, he said.

“One problem I have with the naysayers, while I really do not like in 2009 that kind of work, I also think to go back in

Bend, is acquired by Aspen. The school was founded in 1997.

2005: Aspen acquires Redmond-based SageWalk: The Wilderness School. SageWalk was founded in 1997. This year, the school was featured in the ABC series “Brat Camp.”

2006: CRC Health, a conglomeration of treatment centers and weight-loss camps for adults and children, purchases Aspen Education Group for \$280 million. CRC Health is controlled by Bain Capital, a private equity firm that now manages about \$60 billion in assets.

2009: April: The state begins investigation of abuse allegations at Mount Bachelor Academy.

- August: A camper at SageWalk, 16-year-old Sergey Blashchishen, collapses while hiking and dies at the scene. The case is still under investigation by the Lake County Sheriff’s Office.

- September: The state orders SageWalk to send its students home.

- November: Mount Bachelor Academy’s license is suspended by DHS after an investigation finds nine confirmed counts of abuse and neglect at the school. Aspen Education Group files a layoff notice with the state of Oregon, indicating that it does not plan to reopen the school.

Sources: Securities and Exchange Commission filings, Aspen Education Group news releases, Bulletin research The academy’s offspring

A handful of former Mount Bachelor Academy instructors and counselors went on to found a number of other facilities in Central Oregon. At least one was later acquired by Aspen Education Group, while others are still independent.

- College Excel: Founded in 2003 by Jeannie Crowell, who worked at Mount Bachelor and later founded NorthStar Center. The school is for young adults who are preparing for college or who had trouble transitioning into college.

- NorthStar Center: Founded by Dennis Crowell and Jeannie Crowell in 1991. Dennis Crowell was also a founder and one-time director of Mount Bachelor Academy. NorthStar was purchased by Aspen Education Group in 1998.

- Ohana House: An independent living house in Bend for women from 17.5 to 30 years old. It was founded by Malia Mullahey, who began at Mount Bachelor as a mentor in 1994, according to a company news release announcing her hiring.

The academy’s parent companies and their Web marketing practices

Mount Bachelor Academy and its parent companies — Aspen Education Group and CRC Health Group — have a reputation for aggressive marketing techniques, most notably through a variety of Web sites tailored to parents of troubled teens.

The sites include byparents-forparents.com, adoptionissues.org, overweightteen.com, yourlittleprofessor.com and teenboarding schools.com. They’re presented as information portals for parents seeking information, not advertising sites for the schools. All of the sites except for yourlittleprofessor.com, targeted at parents of children with Asperger’s syndrome, note on their home pages that they’re funded by CRC Health. The sites don’t make clear, though, that CRC Health owns all of the schools referenced on the sites. The current incarnation of the sites is much more transparent than earlier versions, education consultant Tom Croke wrote in a review of Aspen’s marketing

hindsight to 30 years ago and damn the people who created this as if they were money-grubbing child abusers. That simply wasn't true," Croke said.

Rather, those people were well-intentioned but lacking today's knowledge, Croke said. Indeed, the methods spread to at least six other schools, because they were seen as effective at helping many children.

"Anecdotally, they were successful with a lot of kids," Croke said. "What is not as well documented are the casualties that were associated with that."

The Bulletin contacted Houghton and four other former top MBA officials. Houghton and three others did not return messages. Former MBA Director Dennis Crowell declined to be interviewed.

#### *Aspen Education Group*

In 1997 or 1998, College Health Enterprises spun off Mount Bachelor Academy and a handful of other youth facilities into the company that became Aspen Education Group.

Aspen quickly grew to become one of the largest owners of therapeutic schools and wilderness camps in the nation by buying independent facilities and starting new ones of its own.

Woodbury, the Idaho consultant, said part of Aspen's success was a policy of allowing each facility to retain its own character, rather than imposing a single corporate culture.

"They tried to maintain the uniqueness of each culture so that the differences would remain," Woodbury said.

It now owns four facilities in Central Oregon, including the academy. Its largest concentration of youth programs is in Utah, where it owns nine facilities.

Utah Licensing Director Ken Stettler said the Aspen programs in his state are generally well-run.

When problems do occur, "our programs have been very good about responding to those things," Stettler said. "They do the right things by getting it fixed."

Stettler said none of the Aspen programs had incurred a major violation since he started in his position in 2002.

However, three children have died in Aspen-owned facilities in Utah since 2004. Two deaths were suicides. The other happened in 2007, when 14-year-old Brendan Blum died of a bowel obstruction, after counselors failed to call for medical assistance, despite his complaints of stomach pain, loss of bowel control and vomiting.

The school, Youth Care of Utah, had the proper procedures in place and wasn't at fault, said Stettler.

"The school itself had trained the staff in the policy and procedure in reporting of illnesses, and those staff had failed to follow the training that was provided," he said.

apparatus. Before last year, CRC didn't disclose that it owned those sites, said Croke, who discovered the connections.

Because parents are often making those choices during times of stress, they may be more likely to accept those pitches. It's self-evident, said consultant Doug Bodin, but bears repeating that parents shouldn't rely on the Internet when it comes to researching facilities to send their troubled children.

"It's like going on the Internet to do your own open heart surgery," Bodin said. "Anyone can throw their testimonials out there; everyone can give you a list of enthusiastic students."

Before making those decisions, parents should speak with an educational consultant or mental health professional who knows about the treatment options and climate of each facility, Bodin said.

"Parents are having to make huge decisions involving lots of money at a very vulnerable time," Bodin said. "Too often, parents can miss their own role in helping their child."

— Keith Chu, The Bulletin

A fourth teen, 16-year-old Sergey Blashchishen, collapsed while hiking in Lake County and died on the scene in August. Blashchishen was on a trip with Aspen-owned SageWalk, a wilderness school based in Redmond.

The incident is under investigation by the Lake County Sheriff's Office and the state Department of Human Services. DHS ordered SageWalk to temporarily close in September.

Aspen declined to make any of its officials available for an interview with The Bulletin. In a written statement, Aspen Senior Vice President Mark Dorenfeld said the company takes steps to ensure precautions are taken across its facilities.

"To best serve (students') special needs, we have established best practices and safety protocols within our policies and procedures to enhance the level of care," Dorenfeld wrote. "These policies and procedures incorporate all critical elements of care, from health and wellness protocols, to staff training, to therapeutic practices."

Dorenfeld also said some media accounts of what happened on the trip have been inaccurate. When asked to specify what Dorenfeld was referring to, a spokeswoman said the company "could not comment further."

#### *An old model*

Several boosters of Mount Bachelor Academy in its early days said the school didn't do enough to update its methods over time.

Bend psychologist Michael Conner has worked with facilities for troubled teens in the past and lists Mount Bachelor Academy founder Houghton as an educational adviser for his company that consults with parents of troubled children. Conner said the school was originally designed for teens in need of emotional growth, but not intense mental health services.

"What the program was when it was founded is not the least bit related to what the program became," Conner said. "(It) became quite overfilled with a high number of clinical and severe patients, which the program was never designed (for)."

Jackson said she stopped referring children to Mount Bachelor Academy nearly 10 years ago.

"I have not used it for a number of years as I saw it deteriorating and hanging on to an old model that was really no longer useful," Jackson said.

Croke agreed.

"I can tell you that that didn't surprise me," Croke said, of the state's charges of abuse. "It was irresponsible of (Aspen) to allow that kind of programming to continue to go on in the year 2009."

Earlier this year, The Bulletin spoke with 10 former students — several of whom had positive experiences at Mount Bachelor — who described one or more of the practices mentioned in the state's complaint.

Despite the concerns of professionals and some students, a legion of parents and former students say allegations of abuse are overblown and that unorthodox methods, such as using a week or even a month of manual labor as punishment, get results.

Beth McKinnon's 16-year-old son, Quinn, had been at MBA for six months when the school closed two weeks ago. McKinnon, a licensed family therapist in Santa Cruz, Calif., said she felt entirely comfortable with the program at Mount Bachelor Academy.

McKinnon, like many parents of former students there, grew emotional while talking about the program's benefits for her child. It's the only place where Quinn has ever felt comfortable in a group, she said.

"I would hate to see these schools get shut down because a few people felt they were humiliated and embarrassed at what they had to go through," McKinnon said.

### *CRC Health*

In 2006, Aspen Education Group was purchased by the even larger CRC Health Group, an arm of the Mitt Romney-founded private investment firm Bain Capital Inc. Since the merger, though, CRC's performance has been lackluster.

The down economy hit CRC hard. After recording a \$1.5 million profit in 2007, the company lost \$141 million in 2008, according to the company's filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The recession created a double-whammy for the company: Families were less able to afford the steep tuition — Mount Bachelor Academy charged \$6,400 each month — and tighter credit markets meant they had difficulty securing loans to make up the difference.

"In 2008, we experienced a significant decrease in demand for services in our youth division as a result of declining economic conditions and the inability of families to access the credit markets to fund tuition," the company's annual report said.

### *The end*

In April, Oregon DHS opened an investigation into allegations of abuse and neglect at Mount Bachelor Academy. On Nov. 3, the agency found nine confirmed allegations of abuse and ordered the school's license temporarily suspended. MBA Executive Director Sharon Bitz initially said the school would appeal the suspension, but last week, CRC Health filed a mass layoff notice with the state, indicating it would not attempt to reopen Mount Bachelor Academy.

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