Troubled teens were banished to the Monarch Center wilderness program. Then their troubles really started

By Adam Cayton-Holland
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Dave Ventimiglia thought that with Monarch's wilderness therapy, he could provide better care than traditional treatment centers.

Emily Jarvis with her souvenir of Monarch: ten-month-old Lily.

Michael Canty hasn't forgiven his mother for sending him to Monarch.

Subject(s):
Monarch Center for Family Healing, Dave Ventimiglia,

He was one of the smartest dumbasses you'll ever meet," Harry Haney says of his son.

Chris Haney was an honors student who took all advanced placement classes at his Texas high school and was the lead-off hitter on the 5A varsity baseball team his freshman year. "Then he hooked up with a kid who was into some other things," Harry drawls, "and all of a sudden he's ditching practice, his grades went from the high 90s to the 50s. Down here, you're allowed to have nine unexcused absences; his junior year he had 148."

Chris's first other thing was weed, but he quickly got hooked on cocaine. He became addicted to gambling, too.

The Haneys sent Chris to counselor after counselor to try to break him of his new habits. Once Chris found a therapist he liked, he started visiting him regularly — but the Haneys were already working on a backup plan. The therapist had recommended a wilderness-therapy program in Georgetown, Colorado, called Monarch Center for Family Healing, a unique program that sent troubled teenagers off on lengthy wilderness excursions but also treated them therapeutically to get to the root of their problems. The Haneys decided it was the right place for Chris, and they waited for an opening.

"It's one of those things where as a family and a parent you're at your wits' end," Harry says. "'What am I going to do for my kid? I want my kid to be safe, I want him to be back on track as much as he possibly can.' We pretty much were at the mercy of the professionals, and that's what they recommended."

While some teenagers wake up to find a Monarch staffer by their bedside, ready to rip them from the life they know and whisk them to the mountains of Colorado — an extreme, boot-camp tactic that enforces the seriousness of what the student is about to go through — Chris went to Monarch voluntarily, escorted by his parents.

Right away, Harry noticed a few things that worried him. He found it odd that his son was going to be in a coed group camping in the woods. He also wondered if the cheap, plastic fishing-tackle box stuffed to the brim with the different medications of Monarch

Trailhead Wilderness School

students was sufficiently secure. But he'd heard that Monarch was such an amazing place, he let those concerns go.

Out in the field, though, Chris found his daily routine a far cry from the glitzy, biking/white-water rafting/mountain-climbing Colorado experience that Monarch had advertised.

"Basically we'd wake up early, eat breakfast that consisted of powdered milk and cereal, and then we'd hike for miles," Chris remembers. "We'd stop for lunch, then keep hiking for a few more hours, and then we'd camp. We'd sit around the fire and shoot the shit for a little bit at night, but it wasn't therapy; it was just talking. Then the next day we'd do it again. It got to be really, really boring."

And worse. Early on, Chris lost the spoon he'd been assigned for his meals, so he had to consume his meager rations with a stick. An informational pamphlet handed out at orientation had informed students that they were to practice a leave-no-trace style of mountaineering, with each camper issued six squares of toilet paper, but Chris didn't even get that. "They made me wipe my ass with rocks and pinecones," he says. "They never had toilet paper. That six squares thing? That was just bullshit. The girls were made to drip dry."

Each camper carried a thermos. At streams, they'd fill up — and then counselors would purify each thermos with a few drops from an eye-dropper full of chlorine bleach. Sometimes, Chris says, they would just drop the bleach directly into the stream and then tell the kids to fill up. Chris was soon suffering from severe diarrhea.

Monarch typically takes students out into the field for two weeks at a time, then brings them back to Georgetown for a week of family therapy. When the Haneys arrived from Fort Worth, where Harry owns a company that manufactures highway safety equipment, Chris smelled so bad that he had to shower twice before they could take him out for a meal, Harry remembers.

At their first family session, Chris complained about conditions at Monarch. But his parents figured it was just normal bitching about "bad kids' camp," and they sent him back into the field.

The second time Harry came up for family week, he could see in his son's eyes that something wasn't right.

"He said, 'Dad, you have to get me out of here; they just want me for the money,'" Harry remembers.

Harry asked Chris if he'd been getting all the sports pages he'd been sending to keep his son abreast of his beloved Dallas Mavericks, along with many letters. Chris said he hadn't. Nor had Harry gotten any of the individual therapy reports or treatment plans he'd been promised. Although he again left Chris at Monarch, once he got back home, he started investigating the program.

"I saw all the red flags and indications, so I got on their website and there was a sort of chat board, and I started asking parents if they had experienced any of the problems Chris was telling me about," Harry says. "The next day, that section of the site was pulled off the web."

Harry called Monarch and said he'd be there Friday to remove his son from the program. When he got to Georgetown, though, he was told that Chris was in the field, "debriefing," and wouldn't be available for two days. Livid, Harry waited in his hotel until Monday. When Chris finally did return, Monarch employees tried to convince Harry to keep him in the program, claiming that he was not ready to leave. But Harry took Chris and left. On the trip back to Texas, he learned that Chris had been camping on Guanella Pass all weekend, not an hour from Georgetown.

Back home, Chris's stomach problems worsened.

"There were so many days that he missed school because he couldn't get out of bed," Harry says. "He would have diarrhea and stomach cramps that would keep him in bed for literally three days."

"It's still that way," says Chris, who's now eighteen. "This is a constant, daily problem." The doctors still aren't sure if he's suffering from giardia or a scorched lower gastrointestinal tract — but they trace the problem back to Chris's time in Colorado.

"We were duped," Harry says. "The false representation, the treatment that was obviously nowhere near what was advertised. It's just cruel. When your child is at that point, they're on the verge of going over, and more often than not, they're going to take the worst way over. I wasn't going to let that happen to my son, so I sent him to Monarch — and look what happened. And at the price they charge? Almost $375 a day! I felt like I was buying a Cadillac and I ended up getting a used '74 Chevy."

And Harry and Chris Haney aren't the only ones who think they got a lemon.

Dave Ventimiglia, founder and executive director of Monarch Center for Family Healing, is sitting before his computer in the Monarch offices above the post office in the heart of Georgetown, a historic mining town. These few rooms are the only physical manifestation of the center; clients spend most of their time with therapists out in the field, camping in the wilderness.

"My wife and I worked in treatment centers prior to doing this," he explains. Dave and Lori Ventimiglia were both at an Idaho Springs facility for sexually abused children for seven years; Dave also worked at a lockdown facility for adolescents in Lakewood. "We started as child-care counselors and moved on to detention centers, but we got tired of beating our heads against the wall. It was a frustrating process. We were avid outdoor folks, so we had personal experience with how good being in the outdoors had been for us, and we just thought we ought to combine our interests," he says.

"Our first nine-day trip, we were borrowing backpacks and scraping stuff together, but we just kept going and putting it together piece by piece, and as we did so, our vision really developed."

That vision was for a wilderness-therapy program that would separate troubled youth from negative influences and place them in an outdoor setting for an extended amount of time, with therapists along to encourage self-examination and communication. The Ventimiglias' first

venture was Trailhead Wilderness School, which they opened in Georgetown in 1997 as a residential child-care facility and treatment center largely for kids placed there by social services departments. There wasn't much of a family component to the programs they offered — most of their students came from foster and group homes — and the placements typically lasted twelve to fourteen months, with a great deal of that time spent out in the wilderness, often in freezing conditions. The experience was grueling.

"Our staff got tired of it and burned out," Ventimiglia remembers. "We were combining two of the hardest things in the world: working with at-risk kids and then leading an expedition at 10,000 feet. I mean, that can be great for two weeks at a time, like we do now. But ninety days? That's brutal. We started to realize that was not really the right way of going about it."

They also realized that since they were receiving only a bare-bones, Medicaid-mandated fee for each student, the only way to make that program work would be to grow exponentially. At one point, they had four different groups of up to twelve students out in the field, with base camps in Leadville and Georgetown. But they realized they couldn't keep that pace up. "We felt like we weren't doing the job we needed to do," Ventimiglia says, and they closed Trailhead in December 2003.

In March 2004, they reopened as Monarch Center for Family Healing.

Emily Jarvis started experimenting with drugs and alcohol in 2005, toward the end of her eighth-grade year at Mandalay Middle School in Westminster. She began with weed but quickly branched out into ecstasy and cocaine. She also started cutting herself, and when a school counselor noticed the deep incisions Emily had made in her arm with a razor blade, she contacted her parents. They sent her to Centennial Peaks, a psychiatric hospital, where she was diagnosed with clinical depression and placed on Lexapro and Abilify. But as Emily bounced from counselor to counselor her freshman year at Broomfield High School, the cutting continued, as did other forms of acting out. By the time she was fifteen, she reluctantly admits, she'd had more than ten sexual partners.

Emily's parents knew that their daughter was dabbling in marijuana and drinking occasionally — behavior for which she was constantly grounded — but they had no idea what else she was doing. What they did know of her behavior, though, was disturbing enough that they began looking into options, perhaps a place she could go during spring break. Then Emily got two matching tattoos of guns on her hip bones, and her mother, Elyce, took it as a sign: There wasn't any time to spare. A counselor at Broomfield who met regularly with Emily recommended Monarch.

"We thought maybe getting her back into what she loved to do as a kid — hiking, biking, whitewater rafting, all the things that the website said they would be doing with the kids — would be helpful for her," Elyce says, noting that Emily had been a total mountain girl, one who couldn't wait to join her dad on the black-diamond slopes. "We also liked the family-therapy angle. It wasn't just Emily that was the problem; obviously, there was some connection as a family that we lost, and we wanted that back."

The decision to send Emily away wasn't easy, but Elyce didn't know what else to do. "It was a

situation that just couldn't wait any longer," she says. "As a family, we were just desperate."

In February 2007, a Monarch staffer came to get Emily in the middle of the night and drove her to join a group that had already left Georgetown for Arizona. "When we were driving up there, they were explaining how everything was going to work out — and it was completely different when we were actually brought out there," Emily says. "There was no structure whatsoever. It was ridiculous."

Emily's parents had been assured that while the groups were coed, the boys and girls were separated at night and there was lots of supervision. "To be honest with you, I wasn't too concerned with the coed thing," Elyce says. "My thought was that this was a troubled teens' camp; I never figured my daughter would have even been in a position to go off and have sex."

But Emily had no difficulty sneaking out of her tent at night; she just waited until she could hear the counselors snoring. She and another student had sex several times before they were caught. During a group check-in, another student reported that there was "drama" within the group because people were keeping secrets, and he outed Emily and her partner. The two field staffers who were with the group seemed stunned.

"There was no anger, but they were shocked because they had no idea," Emily says. "No one expected it."

The staffers called Dave Ventimiglia, who called Emily's parents; they asked that their daughter have access to a morning-after pill. There were none in the camp's medicine kit, so Emily was to hike out with a member of the field staff and go to the nearest clinic. But just as she was supposed to leave, another camper fell and hit her head on a rock and had to be rushed to a hospital. Emily was lost in the shuffle and finished out her time in the field like everyone else.

Ten days after the counselors had learned Emily was having sex, she finally got back to Georgetown. When Emily saw a doctor, he told her she was pregnant. Emily didn't want to have an abortion.

Upset with Monarch, Emily's parents looked into a few other programs, only to learn that now that Emily was pregnant, none of them would take her. And Monarch staffers "led us to believe that it would be even more detrimental to pull her from the program at that point," Elyce says. So the Jarvises consulted with a doctor, who notified Monarch that Emily would need increased nutrition and care out in the field. But when Elyce found out that Emily was sick and vomiting, she removed her daughter from the program.

"We entrusted them with our daughter, the most important thing in our lives, and they totally failed," Elyce says. "She shouldn't have been put in that position to make a life-altering change at age sixteen. No one should."

When the Ventimiglias transformed Trailhead into Monarch, they joined the National Association of Therapeutic Wilderness Camping, a group committed to "upholding the best practices of our industry through networking, education, counselor certification and the support of research and political action in our field," according to its website. While there are

dozens of programs across the country that specialize in taking kids out of their comfort zone and out into the wilderness, the Ventimiglias emphasized that theirs was a residential child-care facility with a focus on family interaction.

But now, as solely an independent child-care facility rather than also a residential treatment center dependent on federal funds, they also had less interaction with government licensing agencies.

For example, while Trailhead, which operated an on-site school, was registered with the Colorado Department of Education, Monarch was not. "They were approved in October of 1999, but they discontinued through us in March of 2004," says Kama Linscome, principal consultant with the CDE. "Once they're not approved through us, I don't have regular contact."

The Colorado Department of Human Services paid closer attention. As Trailhead, the program had racked up violations, and even a lawsuit. (Ventimiglia says a student ran away and stole a car in Idaho Springs.) "They had been having great difficulty in terms of compliance, the number of incidents that were occurring," a monitoring specialist with the department said of Trailhead in a deposition. "They knew that the state intended to enforce their need to comply, and they felt it would be better for them to close down operations by themselves, take a step back, reorganize and re-implement the program."

While the standards for residential child-care facilities are less stringent than for residential treatment centers, Ventimiglia believes there should be state and federal regulations specific to wilderness-therapy programs. "State workers are trying to hold wilderness programs accountable to regulations that were never designed to govern wilderness programs in the first place," he says.

"Can someone get hurt here? Yes. But the incidents of that are so much lower than in the general population, and we're playing it more risky, with kids in the backcountry. Yes, kids can get hurt, but shit, kids can get hurt in PE.... If society is not careful, in terms of facilities to help kids and families, we're going to end up with locked-up, medicalized facilities. That's the risk here. You can't take the risk out of this industry, just like you can't take the risk out of walking down the street.

"We all need to be careful about trying to sanitize what we do so much that there is no value to it. So that's our risk. Can kids get hurt? Yeah, kids can get hurt. But I'm very comfortable with the level of safety and supervision that we have out there."

While dealing with troubled teenagers — and their troubled parents — can be challenging, their program is important, Ventimiglia says: "I hear all the time from people who sent their kids everywhere, the top places in the industry, and nothing happened, and then they came to Monarch, and everything clicked."

Susan McConnell's fourteen-year-old son was one of those. "Our experience with Monarch was life-changing," she says. She sent her son to the wilderness-therapy program in early 2006, concerned with his anger issues derived from an emotionally abusive father. "Monarch Center for Family Healing is just that," she adds. "We participated in extremely hard emotional work in a safe — emotionally as well as physically — environment."

"When you're looking at a program that works with at-risk adolescents and has been operating almost completely continuously for thirteen years, 365 days a year, we are proud with how relatively few incidents there have been," Ventimiglia says. "I've got a huge bias, obviously — it's my show, but you ought to see the feedback we get. Do we have some people that come through here and wind up dissatisfied? Sure. But I would say maybe 3 percent of people had a bad experience here; the other 97 percent loved it."

Maura Canty learned she was pregnant after a fight with her husband landed her in the hospital. They had been out for a drive when she'd told him of a decision she'd been mulling over for several months: She was leaving him. Her husband snapped. He began driving erratically, threatening to kill them both, and when Maura tried to take control of the wheel, he smashed her so hard in the face that he nearly broke her jaw. The car slammed into a brick wall, and the next thing Maura remembers, she was in the hospital and a nurse was informing her that she was pregnant. She stayed with her husband and gave birth to a boy, Michael, but the situation only got worse.

Michael's father would hold his infant son in his arms and threaten to kill himself. He would put a knife to his own throat and scream how he wanted Michael to see his suicide, and when Maura protested, he would throw her against the wall. Once he went after her with a chainsaw. Eventually, Maura decided she had to get away, and in 1995, at age 24, she fled in the middle of the night, taking whatever she could carry and her three-year-old son. A native of Massachusetts, she decided almost randomly to resettle in Colorado, based on a cheap plane ticket her flight-attendant sister had scored.

She found work as a receptionist at a brokerage firm and an apartment in Aurora, and they were scraping by. But then Michael started acting up.

"He just had a lot of aggression," Maura remembers. "He would kind of attack me and I'd have to hold him down, and he would bite me and throw things at me. He'd throw his toys so hard at the walls he'd put holes in them. He was a tough little kid with some real problems."

She took Michael to see a psychologist at a free clinic at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center who diagnosed him as having attention deficit and attachment disorders and put him on Ritalin. But Maura says the pills turned her son into a vegetable, so she took him off the meds, and with time, he seemed to mellow out.

When Michael was twelve and a student at the Denver Waldorf School, where Maura had sent him to get help for his dyslexia, he got busted for smoking pot and his old problems flared up. The school sent him to the Center for Recovery in Castle Rock, a twelve-week outpatient drug rehab program. But at home he remained defiant. He wouldn't listen to his mother, and he started punching holes in the walls, burning her things. Then Maura discovered disturbing, violent pornography on their computer.

"I was really worried," she says. "He was in therapy at this point, and that was going all right, but he was leaving the Waldorf School and he was going to attend Ponderosa High School with a learning disability. He was already using drugs, and I found that porn stuff, which was the sickest stuff I've ever seen. I was concerned that if he got to high school and he didn't get some

of that stuff worked out over the summer, it could create a really bad situation for him."

An independent therapist who'd been working with Michael suggested that something outdoorsy might help. Maura looked into National Outdoor Leadership School and Outward Bound programs, then found Monarch through the National Association of Therapeutic Wilderness Camping, which lists it as one of the top fifty programs in the nation. Though a month at Monarch was far outside of her price range — at the time, the program cost $375 a day (it's now $395) — she says she was told that student loans were available, and so applied for a $6,000 loan from the Sallie Mae Foundation, a Pennsylvania-based provider that said her application would be approved. Somehow, she scraped the rest of the money together. "The website said it was about leadership, and they were going to get to do all this other outdoor stuff and work through some issues — and I'm going to be a part of it," she says. "It sounded ideal."

Even Michael was excited. "I thought it was going to be a great outdoor camp," he remembers. "I was telling everyone I knew about it."

Maura dropped her son off in Georgetown on a Tuesday. The following week was family-therapy week, and since Michael had only been there a short time, the Monarch staff urged her not to come, Maura says. But she was eager to participate, so she went anyway. Over dinners in Georgetown, Michael complained about the program: Students had to wipe themselves with rocks and sticks, the food sucked, he didn't like the staff, there wasn't much counseling. Maura dismissed his complaints.

Then she went to her first family therapy session.

Monarch bases those sessions on the Gestalt method. Developed by three psychotherapists in New York in the 1950s, Gestalt focuses on experience in the present moment and emphasizes personal responsibility. According to Monarch, it's "especially effective with 'therapy-wise' clients."

The Cantys' session was led by "Elder" Duey Freeman, the director of the Gestalt Institute of the Rockies and a psychotherapist who works as a consultant with Monarch. Although Maura had earlier decided not to tell Michael until he was older about what she, and he, had gone through with his father, she'd thought it important that Monarch have the background. "I gave them a history of what had happened when I checked Michael into Monarch because I thought that might have something to do with his anger, and I guess they thought that was the root of all his problems," Maura says. "So we went into this session and Duey said, 'We want you to tell Michael about what happened to him when he was little.'"

Maura was taken aback, but there were several other counselors in the room, so she decided to comply and spilled the whole story. Michael sat there and took it all in. When he was asked how he felt, he responded that he didn't.

Then Duey asked Maura and Michael to stand up across from each other. "Duey said, 'I'm going to put my hands around your throat right now,'" Maura remembers, "and I was like, 'Uh, okay.' And he put his hands around my throat and he was egging Michael on, asking him, 'What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about it? Are you going to save your mother, huh?' I don't really know what they wanted, but I think they wanted Michael to

protect me and fight back. So Duey grabbed the back of my hair tight, and he put his finger to my throat like he had a knife, and he was like, 'Come on, I'm going to cut her throat, what are you going to do? Are you going to hit me?' Finally, Michael did shove him away from me, and they were like, 'Oh, good job.'"

"I really just wanted to hit the guy," Michael says. "I didn't even really know what to think. He was holding pillows to his chest for me to hit him there, and I just wanted to full-on hit him in the face, because it was totally unnecessary. I didn't see the point in it, and it was pissing me off. It was the first time I had ever been told any of that stuff."

After that session, Michael was going back into the field for a two-week stint of camping, hiking and group therapy. Maura was worried about how her son might handle all the horrific information he'd just been handed, and asked if he was going to receive any immediate counseling. She was assured that he would. But as soon as Michael got back in the field, he was told that some kids from another Monarch group had gotten into the medicine box, crushed up a bunch of pills and snorted the concoction. As a result, the entire camp was being punished through quiet time and solos, which consisted of hiking alone and then sequestering yourself in a tent.

"You're in your tent, there's no talking, you're just supposed to sit there and write in your journal," Michael says. "Those kids up in my group, they were like my family. You get really close with those people, and I wanted to tell them about what was going on and everything I had just learned, but I couldn't. I just had to deal with it."

Maura didn't hear from her son while he was off in the field, but she did hear from the Sallie Mae Foundation: Her loan request was being denied because Monarch was not approved by the Colorado Department of Education, contrary to a claim on its website. She e-mailed Dave Ventimiglia about the discrepancy. "You are reading older information that was pertinent to our days as a social service organization and is no longer relevant," he responded. "When we operated with social services students, it was necessary for us to be approved by CDE — and we were. It is no longer relevant for the type of students and families that we work with now."

"Oh, now I understand, but it is misleading," Maura responded. "Your residential treatment plan I have downloaded says a date on the front of 1/09/06...How would anyone know that information is old?...Sorry but that is one reason I sent Michael there and I bet other parents as well. I hope you correct this on your web as well as to make sure parents who currently have their children there understand your treatment package has not been updated since 2003."

She began looking into more of Monarch's claims. "I checked with the Department of Human Services about their record and I got this horrible report," she says. She read complaints about students not receiving the therapy promised, about lack of supervision and proper sanitation, about children having sex.

Michael was now three weeks into his month-long program, and Maura decided to go up for the final family week and voice her concerns about Monarch. She wanted to know why the website made misleading claims about student loans, why she'd never received Michael's treatment plan, why Michael had been assigned a counselor who was not appropriately trained and did not have a master's degree — yet another contradiction of Monarch's website claims. But as soon as she raised the issue, Maura says, her son was kicked out of the program for non-

payment.

Michael was not allowed to retrieve any of his belongings or the journal he'd been writing in; he wasn't even able to snag the phone number of a girl with whom he'd grown close. He and his mother were simply escorted off the property, with no discharge report or further treatment advice.

"Michael was devastated," Maura remembers. "He wanted to say goodbye to his friends; he spent so much time bonding with those kids. I mean, this is a kid with an attachment disorder to begin with, and he didn't get to say goodbye or get his journal; he was confused, and he figured I was to blame."

Back home, Michael acted very strange. He kept putting his belt around his neck, pretending it was a noose; Maura went around the house and removed all the belts. Then Michael sequestered himself in his bedroom. Maura poked her head in occasionally, and he seemed asleep. After fifteen hours, though, she went back in and found Michael unconscious. She scrolled through his cell phone and found a text to a friend that said, "I'm really fucked up on pills right now."

After a trip to the hospital where nurses told Michael he was lucky to be alive, Maura learned that Michael had ground up an enormous amount of Percocet that he had left over from a knee injury, and some of her Xanax. He'd topped off his chemical cocktail with a bottle of tequila that he'd scored from a neighbor kid. Maura hadn't thought to remove the pills, since Michael had never had any problem with prescription medications in the past — and he hadn't told her about the snorting incident at Monarch.

"Michael doesn't remember a whole lot about that time," Maura says. "He won't say he did it on purpose, but I don't think you're really looking for reflection when you're a teenager. You don't do that type of thing for no reason."

After the overdose. Maura tried to suggest other programs, but Michael said he'd rather live on the street — and on one occasion, he followed through. Finally, Maura took her son back to Massachusetts so they could be closer to her family. When they left Colorado, Michael was as angry as he'd ever been, threatening to kill himself and cut himself; he started punching holes in walls again and yelling at his mother about how he'd never forgive her for sending him to Monarch.

"They took my son," Maura says. "My son didn't come back. He's still my son, but he's not. He's a different person; he doesn't trust me. He used to laugh. He used to joke. They took something from Michael up there and from me, and you can't give that back."

Today Michael is a high school junior. He's still angry — angrier at his mother than he is at Monarch. "Even after I told her all the stuff that was going on," he says, "she wouldn't take me out of there."

In June, the Haney, Jarvis and Canty families filed suit against Monarch in Denver District Court, claiming negligence, "extreme and outrageous conduct," and violation of the Colorado

Consumer Protection Act.

"These families paid a lot of money and placed a lot of trust in Monarch to help these troubled teens, and what they got in return was not only no therapy, but actually a lot of psychological trauma that they wouldn't have if they had just stayed home," says Jay Reinan, the attorney representing the families. "At the time that Monarch was making these wonderful promises about the superiority of their program, they were actually operating under this regulatory cloud that had existed for a number of years. They knew they didn't have adequate supervision in the field, yet they placed these vulnerable students in that situation."

"You can't say things that aren't true to get people to buy into your service," adds co-counsel Jordana Griff. "That's the reason the Colorado Consumer Protection Act exists. But that's exactly what happened here."

Monarch has denied the allegations in the lawsuit and has filed counterclaims against the Canty and Jarvis families for outstanding fees.

"I took their material for what it said, and it just wasn't true," says Maura Canty, who hopes that through this lawsuit she can prove to Michael how badly fooled she was by Monarch, and that his experience there was not her fault. "I want them shut down, and I want to protect other parents so that this never happens to another family."

Because of the pending case, Dave Ventimiglia says he can't discuss specific charges made by the families, but he can talk about the nature of what he's been doing for the past thirteen years: taking care of troubled children in a wilderness setting and using intense Gestalt therapy that is difficult but, he believes, the most effective means of helping troubled teenagers out there.

While the website advertises that campers can participate in such recreational experiences as whitewater rafting, mountain biking and horseback riding, Ventimiglia explains that every camper's experience is different, and that depending on a variety of factors, some groups will forgo certain experiences.

Although at one point Monarch's website stated that "all of the therapists possess their Master's Degree in either Social Work or Counseling," that is not the case today. Monarch employs state-licensed psychotherapists, master's level therapists and interns — many of them Naropa third-year graduate students working toward their master's degrees. In Colorado, unlicensed psychotherapists are allowed to practice provided they file with the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies and provide disclosure statements attesting to their qualifications. According to Ventimiglia, all of the unlicensed psychotherapists working with Monarch issue such disclosure statements, but families may get confused about which counselors have which qualifications, because the Gestalt therapy sessions can get a bit chaotic.

"This is not therapy where the kid gets pulled to the side and worked with one on one," he says. "There's lots of therapists, therapists all over the room, lots of people interacting. Most of the confusion comes from the fact that this is a different type of therapy, and for some people, that freaks them out.... There may be confusion about who has a master's and who's licensed, but it's irrelevant — it just is. In the heat of the moment, it's more if you don't like that person, you can work with this other person. That's the method."

Out in the field, there are usually between three and five therapists for a group of eight to ten students, Ventimiglia says. Occasionally, none of those therapists are licensed — but that's not a violation of any state regulations.

As for setting up single-sex groups in the field, to separate kids with promiscuity problems, "That's like saying my son has an anger problem, he keeps punching holes in the walls, he blows up on his PE teacher, I need you to deal with that, and then not letting us tackle the issue," Ventimiglia says. "When a kid blows up in the field, we encourage for that to be spoken. Most treatment centers come up with a point system or drug the kid so you never see the anger, and that's just going to come out later. Well, sex is the same thing, and drugs and grief are the same things. The parents come to us and say we need help with this girl who is promiscuous. We could pretend to make it very safe and that we're not going to deal with sex because it makes everyone squeamish and nervous and there's some risk to it, but that is such a disservice to the parents, because adolescence and hormones, are you kidding me? That's number one.... Yes, there's all sorts of selective flirting, or overt flirting, or girls who come in and they zip their fleece down so their breasts are exposed. For us, it's like, okay, that's what we deal with. The risk is because we don't lock the kids up, somebody is going to sneak out and screw somebody. We're like, we have a job to do, which is to help these kids get back into the family; we cannot work with sexuality without talking about sex."

Drugs and peer pressure are two very powerful things," says Emily Jarvis, grabbing a cup of cereal out of the hands out of her daughter, ten-month-old Lily. "Once you get sucked in, it's very rare that you get out."

Seated across the table, Elyce offers up a weary nod and a smile. "She knows that if we even suspect that she's using again, we'll call social services the minute she walks in the house," Elyce says. "That won't even be an option."

Emily is fully aware of this arrangement and has come to appreciate it; she says it helps that her parents don't give her any choice. Emily completed her GED last July and is currently taking a drawing class at Front Range Community College; she likes school and hopes to major in interior design. She's completely sober and has managed to stave off the drugs and the damaging, promiscuous behavior that marred her early adolescence.

Having a baby at sixteen tends to make you grow up fast.

"Everyone is shocked when they find out that I got pregnant while I was at Monarch," she says. "I was in a support group for kids who get out of these types of programs, and everyone in there was blown away that this happened when I was in the wilderness, at a camp. They had no idea how we were able to get away with this stuff. I could go on about how every person I went there with when they got out either went back to their old ways or got worse. The only reason I got better is because I had a baby. Lily is the best thing that ever happened to me, but having a baby at sixteen was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. It was definitely not something I was expecting."

She wants to make sure that no other kids get surprised at Monarch. "I don't think they should be able to try and redo Monarch, because it's not going to change, and they're going to continue

to take advantage of people," she says. "The three of us in this case, we're the only three that came forward. Who knows how many more kids like us are out there?"

Contact the author at adam.cayton-holland@westword.com.