



Mother seeks refund of \$36,000 spent to get son a diploma from Clark program

## Marines reject candidate schooled at Wyo youth ranch

By RUFFIN PREVOST - The Billings Gazette | Posted: Sunday, March 14, 2010 12:00 am

CODY -- A woman who spent thousands of dollars to put her son through a Park County program for troubled boys is seeking a refund after learning that the correspondence school diploma he earned there does not meet U.S. Marine Corps admission standards.

Dawn Cooper of Birmingham, Ala., took out a loan and cashed in an annuity she had set aside for retirement. She used the money to pay \$36,000 for her son to attend the Mount Carmel Youth Ranch in Clark and a related program for adults, Bear Tooth MT Ascent. Both programs share staff and facilities on a 40,000-acre cattle ranch.

Mount Carmel Youth Ranch manager Matt Schneider said he was unaware of problems with the military accepting graduates from his program, and that other boys from the ranch had successfully entered the Marines.

A spokesman for a regional charity that has given \$350,000 to the youth ranch defended its grants, saying the program has a good record of helping troubled teens get back on track.

"There are people that have mortgaged their homes to have their kids there, and they're not getting adequate care or counseling or the other things they need," said Cooper, whose son, Mason Holt, attended the youth program in the summer of 2008, and the adult program in the fall of that year.

Cooper said she put her son in the youth program to help with family issues and to help him finish high school so that he could join the Marines.

Holt flourished under the boys' program, thanks mainly to a couple of dedicated staff members who have since left the ranch, she said. When Holt came home after completing the youth program, she was thrilled with his progress, and enrolled him in the adult program to finish work toward a high school diploma.

"He was worse off when he came back the second time than when he went in the first time. I got so upset, I was just infuriated," she said.

Holt, 19, said he passed the vocational aptitude test for the Marines and was ready to enlist when his recruiter told him that the ranch's academic program was unaccredited and didn't meet admissions standards.

A year wasted

"I felt like I wasted a year of my life," Holt said.

Holt said the ranch had changed in the three months between when he left the youth program, turned 18, and entered the newly started Bear Tooth MT Ascent program for men 18-26.

"I was kind of distraught. I was just amazed at how bad it had gotten. They just wanted us to work the whole time and didn't want us to do any school work," he said.

While he was pleased with the schooling in the youth program, Holt said, academics were practically abandoned in the adult program, where he and others were told to focus on the business of running cattle operations.

"I basically paid money, thousands, for him to go out there and work their ranch," Cooper said.

Schneider would not comment on whether he would offer Cooper a refund, and said he was unaware of any problems with the military not accepting students who received diplomas from the ranch's academic programs.

A Gazette story in 2007 detailed problems students have had in transferring credits from Mount Carmel's unaccredited Our Lady of the Rosary home school program.

Sgt. Thomas Rinehart, a Marine recruiter in Cody, said that admissions standards are posted online. He said that students must have a high school diploma from an accredited, traditional high school, or they must score exceptionally high on

aptitude tests. Otherwise, they need a general equivalency degree and 15 hours of college credit, a path Holt is working to complete.

Schneider said parents are fully briefed on the two academic programs offered, Our Lady of the Rosary and Seton, a separate, nationally accredited Catholic home school program.

"We tell the parents the difference between both schools, and the parents choose which school," Schneider said.

"She didn't talk to me about it. She could have been talking to the school director we had at that time," he said.

Cooper and Holt said they each had several conversations with ranch personnel, including the school director, about Holt's goal to join the Marines, and that they were told that Our Lady of the Rosary was the right program for him.

Cooper said that enrolling Holt in the Seton program "was not even an option given to us."

Unreturned calls

"Mason came back the second time and was really struggling, and they told him when he left, 'We'll always be here for you.' He would call and leave message after message after message, and no one would return his call," Cooper said.

She said she left several messages at the ranch expressing her frustration over the school program, but heard from Schneider only after The Gazette contacted the ranch seeking comment.

Cooper said her son did not receive the schooling or counseling he was promised, and that she felt cheated after spending so much money on the program.

Public disclosure records for 2008 for the tax-exempt, nonprofit Mount Carmel Youth Ranch show that its annual revenues were \$825,220, and that it spent \$12,125 on counseling, less than what it spent on advertising and promotions.

The Daniels Fund, which primarily supports charities and programs in Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, announced in February a \$100,000 grant to the program.

Peter J. Droege, a spokesman for the Daniels Fund, said he was not sure whether the grant would support operations, capital projects or both.

Records for the Daniels Fund also show grants to Mount Carmel Youth Ranch in 2004 of \$75,000 for staff housing and in 2007 of \$175,000 for a sports complex.

"We do set a very high standard for due diligence in reviewing grant requests, and this was the case with Mount Carmel Youth Ranch," Droege said.

He said data provided by Mount Carmel Youth Ranch showed that it had a proven record of "having a clear and significant impact in getting youth to be self-sufficient and independent so they can move on to better lives."

Droege said he was aware of incidents at the ranch, including a violent assault in 2005 in which boys used a shovel to beat a counselor in the head, causing him serious, permanent disabilities.

Droege said that incident resulted because the counselor did not follow ranch policies, and that the program has since improved operations, regularly meeting Wyoming's certification standards for a group home.

"A lot of society is willing to write off these young people, and thinks we're better off building bigger prisons," he said.

"We're sold on this one," Droege said of the youth ranch. "We think they do exactly what they set out to do, serving an at-risk population that's very difficult to work with."