



Costa Rica government closes controversial 'tough love' youth camp

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Another youth behavior modification center run by the Utah-based World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP) is closed following allegations of abuse. This one was run by the association's director, Bob Lichfield, brother of Narvin Lichfield, who ran a similar center here until it was voluntarily shut down in 2003.

For the second time in the past nine years a behavior modification center run by the Utah-based World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP) was closed in Costa Rica for alleged psychological and physical mistreatment of residents.

Last Friday, the Child Welfare Office (PANI) closed the center, known as Teen Mentor, which advertises therapeutic and psychological services to 21 U.S. teenagers aged 13 to 18. Parents had placed the troubled teens in the facility to address behavioral issues and problems with substance abuse.

PANI closed the center after receiving complaints that the student residents were being subjected to physical and mental abuse from the supervisors of the program. Three PANI psychologists visited the facility to interview the students when they were alerted to the allegedly abusive conditions at the center, the daily La Nación reported.

The organization's website, which has since been disabled, offered behavior modification services for a monthly fee. The residents had been staying at the Hotel Carara in the town of Tárcoles de Garabito, in Puntarenas, west of San José near the Pacific Ocean.

"They rented the entire hotel for several months," said a hotel employee who asked that his name be withheld. "The boys were downstairs, the girls were upstairs. As far as abuse or things like that, we usually only saw the kids during pool time and don't really know what went on when they went to the beach or outside. When I came to work on Friday, PANI was here and by that night everyone was gone."

Robert Walter Lichfield, the founder of the WWASP program, registered Teen Mentor as an official business in the national registry in August 2010. In the last 16 years, 15 behavioral facilities operated by WWASP have been closed due to similar allegations by child welfare organizations in the U.S. and other countries.

In 2002, Narvin Lichfield, Robert's brother, was director of the Dundee Ranch Academy in the town of Hidalgo, Orotina, west of San José. A Tico Times investigation that year found that many of the students who attended the academy accused Dundee staff of physical and psychological abuse. In an interview with The Tico Times in 2002, Narvin explained his "high impact" behavioral modification methods, which included tactics such as making students walk 100 miles around a track under the hot Pacific sun to earn their "freedom," or forcing them to spend up to five days in "solitary confinement" as punishment for looking out of the window during a lesson.

"I am sure 'High Impact' will be mistaken as jail, there is no doubt about it," he told The Tico Times in 2002. "But this is no different from any boarding school in England" (TT, Oct. 25, 2002).

In 2003, PANI raided the Dundee Ranch facility after a U.S. woman living in Costa Rica, Susan Flowers, reported to PANI that her daughter was being held against her will at the academy. The raid resulted in a student riot and 35 teens escaped from the site (TT, May 23, 2003).

After the raid, Narvin Lichfield was briefly arrested and charged with detaining minors against their will, coercion and international rights violations. When the case finally went to trial in early 2007, judges declared Lichfield **innocent for lack of evidence** (TT, Feb. 23, 2007). Judges did say they believed students' rights had been violated at the Dundee Ranch, but prosecutors had failed to prove it.

"We're happy that the law and the system actually works," Lichfield told The Tico Times after the trial in Alajuela, west of San José. He added that he was "very unhappy that things that have never been proven" and that judges used "hearsay" to affirm that abuse occurred at the camp.

For more on this story, see the March 25 print edition of The Tico Times.