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Child Welfare Office closes yet another teen reform center

Posted: Friday, March 25, 2011 - By Adam Williams



Tammy Zibners | Tico Times

A youth behavior modification center run by the Utah-based World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP) is closed following allegations of abuse.

Not Guilty: In 2007, former Dundee Ranch administrator Narvin Lichfield, above, was found non-guilty of abusing teens at his behavior modification camp in Costa Rica. Last Friday, child welfare officers closed a similar camp run by his brother, Bob Lichfield, citing abusive practices.

For the second time in the past nine years, a 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.

Last Friday, the Child Welfare Office (PANI) closed the center, known as Teen Mentor, which advertised itself online as a therapeutic and psychological services program for U.S. teenagers dealing with behavioral issues and substance abuse problems.

According to PANI technical director Jorge Urbina, PANI officers visited Teen Mentor's facilities on Friday after three Costa Rican psychologists reported that they witnessed abuse of student residents.

Teen Mentor was operated out of Hotel Carara, in the Pacific coastal town of Tárcoles de Garabito.

Student residents told PANI investigators that they had experienced physical, verbal and psychological abuse while at the facility.

"We intervened on Friday and interviewed all the kids from the program. Their reports were similar to the reports made by the psychologists about mistreatment and rights violations," Urbina told The Tico Times. "It was apparent that the regimen of discipline included physical, psychological and verbal mistreatment."

Urbina said that when PANI officials arrived, no program supervisors were present at the hotel.

In addition to the reports of abuse, Urbina said that the program wasn't registered with PANI or the Health Ministry, thus rendering it illegal. Permits from PANI and the Health Ministry are required to run an organization that works with children under the age of 18.

According to the organization's website, www.horizonbootcamp.com, residents would be offered therapy to assist struggling teens to "provide structure, supervision and discipline" for a monthly fee beginning at \$500 per month.

Urbina said that none of the 20 U.S. residents, aged 15-17, reported receiving any therapeutic guidance.

"The place promoted itself as a therapeutic center with recreational offerings," Urbina said. "But in our investigation we found that there was no therapy being performed at the school nor was there a recreational program. It was a completely unauthorized school."

The U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica also addressed the closing of the program this week.

"The Embassy had no role in the decision to close the school or remove the students [from Teen Mentor]. The matter falls fully under the jurisdiction of Costa Rican authorities, primarily PANI. The Embassy contacted the parents of U.S. citizen students, and has been working with the parents and the Costa Rican authorities to get them home safely."

Second Time Around

Robert Walter Lichfield, who also goes by the first name Bob and is the founder of the WWASP program, registered Teen Mentor as an official business in the national registry in August 2010 and began operating it here last October. 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.

When the Dundee Ranch site was closed in 2003, another program overseen by the WWASP organization moved into the same location. Known as Pillars of Hope, a Tico Times report in 2006 revealed that the program functioned as a language school and did not abide by the same "high impact" behavioral practices of Dundee Ranch (TT, Dec. 15, 2006).

Despite the controversy surrounding WWASP programs and schools, the academies have always produced polemic responses from former students and parents. While some former students decry traumatic abuse and

punishments such as denial of food, other former students report satisfactory experiences and considerable improvements in behavior. Some report a mixture of both.

"I feel so grateful for what the program did for me. It's worth suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, because once I get over it, I'm gonna do great," Mary Gilbert, who was 14 in 2003, wrote in a letter to The Tico Times that year.

According to Urbina, all but one student have been reunited with family members and returned to the U.S. with the assistance of the U.S. Embassy. The remaining teenager is under PANI's care while waiting to be picked up by family.

Without the appropriate permits, Urbina said the school would be shut down indefinitely. Since the teenagers had been in the country since October, it is unclear whether they had valid visas.

The Tico Times attempted to contact three WWASP schools in the U.S., and one that is still operating here, but no one answered the phone numbers listed on their websites (TT, Jan. 24, 2003).