Increasingly, Internet Activism Helps Shutter Abusive 'Troubled Teen' Boot Camps

By **MAIA SZALAVITZ** Tuesday, April 5, 2011 | **0 COMMENTS**

MORE

Related Topics: Addiction , Adolescence , adolescents , aspen education , behavior modification , boot camps , CRC health , Drugs , elan school , Mental Health , mount bachelor academy , rehab , sage walk , teens , tough love , troubled teen

For the last 40 years, teens with drug problems, learning disabilities and other behavioral issues have been sent to residential facilities to endure "tough love" techniques that are widely known to include methods of outright physical and psychological abuse.

Whether labeled as boot camps, emotional-growth schools, behavior modification programs or wilderness programs, these organizations have operated without federal oversight, and state regulation of the schools ranges from lax to nonexistent. Now, however, individual critics of the programs are using the Internet to find each other and mobilize, and are bringing change.

Consider the Elan School, in Poland, Maine, which has long been known for its extreme practices. On April 1, Elan shut its doors after four decades in operation, blaming negative publicity online for recent declines in enrollment. "The school has been the target of harsh and false attacks spread over the Internet with the avowed purpose of forcing the school to close," Sharon Terry, Elan's executive director, told the Lewiston Maine *Sun Journal*. The paper reported:

> Despite several recent investigations conducted by the Maine Department of Education that Terry said have vindicated the school, "the school has, unfortunately, been unable to survive the damage."

Elan is just the most recent in a growing list of victories for opponents of tough residential programs for troubled teens. In the last three years, some 40 other private institutions like Elan have closed, and others have been condemned by state investigations, as activism online — mostly led by survivors of such programs and their parents — has increased.

Last month, the Oregon Department of Human Services released its report on the August 2009 death of Sergey Blashchishena, a 16-year-old student at the Sagewalk wilderness program in Bend, Ore., which was run by Aspen Education, the largest chain of behavioral health centers for teenagers in the U.S. Blashchishena died of heatstroke on his first day at the program after being made to hike in 89-degree weather, carrying a backpack that exceeded the weight standard for adult infantrymen. He was not given medical aid when he began to show signs of heat exhaustion.

Online activists widely posted stories about Blashchisena's death and encouraged former program participants to send information to investigators. The state's final report substantiates findings of neglect against the program and two of its staff members.

Also in 2009, an investigation by TIME found that girls at another Aspen program in Oregon, Mount Bachelor Academy, were being forced to do lap dances and other inappropriate sexual acts as part of "therapy." A state investigation of the school would later confirm that "sexualized role play in front of staff and peers, requiring students to say derogatory phrases about themselves in front of staff and peers" and "requiring students to reenact past physical abuse in front of staff and peers" did occur, and that the practices were "punitive, humiliating, degrading and traumatizing."

(**More on TIME.com:** Are Lap Dances an Appropriate Part of Troubled-Teen Treatment?)

In this case, again, Facebook groups, websites and email lists allowed program survivors and their parents to find one other; they uncovered information about earlier state investigations into Mount Bachelor that had been stymied by lack of access to victims, and they were able to pool new information to help current investigators see the pattern of abuse.

Both Aspen programs are now closed, and just last month the group announced the closure of five more programs as well as the consolidation of another three around the country. In a press release, Aspen blamed the economy, saying, "This transition reflects the reduced demand for therapeutic schools and programs in today's economy."

While it's certain that the economic downturn has contributed to the programs' financial troubles — tuition can cost $6,000 a month or more, over several months to years — activism online has also clearly played a significant role. The Elan School was simply the first to cite Internet activity as a direct cause of its closure.

"This movement couldn't have happened without the Internet," says Kathryn Whitehead, founder of CAFETY, the Community Alliance For the Safe and Ethical Treatment of Youth, and a former student at another abusive program that recently closed. "The Internet has been absolutely critical because survivors are spread out across the U.S. They get sent to a program and then they have to go home. When you connect to other program survivors, you recognize that this is a large-scale problem, not an individual program's problem. That has been critical in bringing people together. It's an incredibly effective organizing tool."

What's more, unlike in the heyday of troubled-teen programs, the Internet now allows the instantaneous sharing of information about the current and past goings-on at the schools; in previous eras, those details were scattered in the archives of local newspapers or government files.

When activists looked up local newspaper accounts of the Elan School from 1975, for instance, they found that psychologists who visited Elan had been quoted as saying it was "bizarre and degrading" and that "the whole concept of the program seems to be a brain-washing technique."

Elan was among the most notorious of the country's emotional-growth schools. It was there, in the late 1970s, that Michael Skakel, cousin to Robert F. Kennedy Jr., allegedly confessed to the 1975 murder of his 15-year-old neighbor in Greenwich, Conn., Martha Moxley — a crime for which Skakel remains incarcerated. Skakel's parents had enrolled the boy at Elan to treat an alcohol problem after he was arrested for drunk driving in 1978, several years after the murder.

But what is less known are the techniques commonly used to prompt such confessions at Elan — tactics that were employed at the school for decades, according to former students, often with knowledge of state authorities.

Take "the ring," for instance. In this disciplinary tactic, two students are encircled by a ring of their peers, their arms tightly meshed to prevent escape. Dozens of students and staff members congregate around the ring to spectate, packed into a bare room not much bigger than a studio apartment. At the only exit to the outdoors, which opens directly to the Maine woods, a teenage sentry is stationed. Sentries guard interior doors as well.

One of the student "boxers" inside the ring has been designated to "fight on the side of good." He's there as a representative of the school. The other has been labeled as the bad guy: he is there to accept punishment for breaking one of the school's many strict rules.

As the match gets underway, the ring of teens, typically aged 13 to 18, participates by hitting, pinching or trying to trip the bad guy; maltreating him is not only not encouraged, it's the point. Refusing to participate in jeering or bullying is suspect, and teens who stay quiet risk becoming victims themselves.

Between one-minute rounds, the victim is taunted by spectators and denied water and crowd support. Until he surrenders and accepts whatever label or rule he had rebelled against, fresh opponents are brought in to break him. When he does finally break, the damage is both physical — he's typically bruised and bloodied — and mental. Similar "rings" were also held for girls.

And that's only one example tough love, Elan style. Such accounts of torture and neglect date back to the 1970s, and many came to light as part of the sensational Skakel murder trial in 2002. Witnesses describe kids being systematically slammed against every wall of an entire dormitory. They detail grueling days of sleep deprivation, beatings and psychological humiliation. Students were consistently left in charge of other teens, and instructed to beat them if they did not comply with orders.

Based primarily on testimony from Elan classmates, who said they heard Skakel confess to killing Moxley, the Kennedy cousin was convicted. At Elan, Skakel was made to wear a sign for weeks saying "Confront Me About Why I Killed My Friend," and he is said to have confessed to the murder only after a session in the ring. Confessions gained by the police through methods similar to those used at Elan are illegal. "Basically, they tried to erase you," said one woman who attended Elan from 2002 to 2004.

Jeff Wimbelton led the online charge to close Elan. (The name is a pseudonym; for professional reasons, Wimbelton does not wish to be identified.) Now in his 20s, he attended the school in the early 2000s, having been sent there following an arrest for running away from home.

Wimbelton says he witnessed the brutality of the ring at least 20 times during the two years he was enrolled at Elan, and was himself made to fight "on the side of good."

Although the state of Maine was aware that this violent ritual was being conducted at the school, it did little more than encourage Elan to stop voluntarily. Yellow Light Breen, a spokesperson for the Maine Department of Education, told the *Sun Journal* in 2002 that:

> ...his department was aware of the "ring" treatment at Elan and that it was a "real issue" 10 to 12 years ago. "We pressed them pretty hard and they agreed not to do it," he says. "We were certainly led to believe it ceased several years" ago.
>
> Also, he added, in the last year, the DOE has banned the use of restraints and so-called "adverses," like being hit, pinched or being subject to loud noises.

Wimbelton says that despite Elan's claims that the ring was stopped in 2000, he saw a ring session as late as 2001. Other former students corroborate his story.

In 2007, the continued use of so-called aversive therapies despite a lack of evidence of their effectiveness — and despite significant evidence of their harms — spurred me to write an op-ed piece about Elan for the New York *Times*. At the time, Elan was one of two out-of-state programs using punitive treatment at which New York State youth with conditions like autism, learning disabilities or behavior problems were eligible to receive state-funded treatment.

My piece prompted a state investigation. As the *Sun Journal* reported:

> David Connerty-Marin, spokesman for the Maine Department of Education, said the agency has "investigated Elan a number of times based on reports of abuse and other deficiencies, and never found any evidence." He said that New York officials also have investigated, and never found evidence of abuse at the Poland school.

But that's not what New York State officials told me. In a letter to Elan following the investigation prompted by my *Times* op-ed, regulators said that Elan used "sleep deprivation," excessive isolation and restraint, and "coercive and confrontational" counseling that was conducted by untrained students, who often used foul language. They asked that these "health and safety" issues be resolved within seven days.

It's not clear why Maine's investigators failed for decades to find abuse at the school, while New York's officials saw disturbing treatment during their first visit. It could be because Maine announces its inspections in advance, while New York sends investigators to programs unannounced.

Wimbelton was inspired to act after reading media reports about the 2007 investigation of Elan and the later comments of recent graduates. One woman wrote in the comments section below my Huffington Post article about the investigation that her nephew had committed suicide after being enrolled at Elan. Another woman who had attended the school from 2005 to 2008 commented there that she was "traumatized."

"Reading that comment, it was like a fuse went off in my brain," says Wimbelton, who had assumed that Elan had reformed its ways since he had attended. "I thought, I can't believe this is still going on. I have to do something to stop it."

He waged an online war using every weapon he could think of: Facebook pages, tumblr blogs, websites and other social media. When Wimbelton posted about Elan on Reddit, the post received thousands of votes and generated enormous traffic. He encouraged others to post their stories too. People responded, posting and cross-linked their missives enough so that anti-Elan sites soon began to rise to the top of Google's search results, offering parents a very different view of the program than that on the school's own website.

Wimbelton even looked up the local media's coverage of school sports, which listed the names of Elan athletes. With a little online sleuthing, Wimbleton was able to find the names of the parents of the kids; he called them to try to warn them about what went on at the school. Upon hearing Wimbelton's story and reading the links he sent, the parents of four such children decided to withdraw their enrollment, he says.

"The fantastic thing about the Internet has been that individuals can post their own personal experiences — it's not a one-sided marketing tool," says Whitehead.

Elan insists that it has done nothing wrong, and that the 40 years worth of stories from dozens of teens has misrepresented its curriculum. Indeed, there are some former students who thank the school for its tough tactics, crediting them for saving their lives. But since there has never been a controlled study of the program's methods, it's impossible to know whether they could possibly be broadly effective.

"It's surreal," Wimbleton says of the school's closure. "There were times I thought it was a lost cause. How in God's name was that allowed to go on for so long?"

"It's fantastic news," says Whitehead. But she notes that about 400 private, unregulated programs still operate, locking down teens and using harsh, humiliating and confrontational approaches as therapy. Legislation to regulate these programs passed the House following GAO investigations and Congressional hearings in 2007 and 2008, but the bill is still awaiting introduction into the Senate and passage of new regulations appears unlikely.

Related Topics: Addiction , Adolescence , adolescents , aspen education , behavior modification , boot camps , CRC health , Drugs , elan school , Mental Health , mount bachelor academy , rehab , sage walk , teens , tough love , troubled teen

More ways to get Healthland

Sign up for the Newsletter | Get updates on Facebook | Follow on Twitter

Comment on this Story

Login | Login required, click here to begin

Share | This Page

Follow | Cancel | Post

Echo 23 Items | Admin

AlecMaybarduk
The (very) dark side of private poorly regulated reform schools, in Maine and everywhere. via @TIMEHealthland
Today, 10:15:47 AM – Reply via Twitter

Charles D. Nichols
#slavery by any other name: abusive boot camp schools which forced girls into lap dances for "therapy" Read more:
Today, 9:15:27 AM – Reply via Twitter

Lisa Ginn
Poland, ME? Why haven't I heard of this: via @TIMEHealthland
Today, 8:36:44 AM – Reply via Twitter

Lalita
Web activism helps shut down abusive boot camp schools, like one which forced girls into lap dances for "therapy" /@TIME
Today, 8:24:15 AM – Reply via Twitter

CoffeeShopChronicles
#slavery by any other name: abusive boot camp schools which forced girls into lap dances for "therapy" |
Today, 8:22:06 AM – Reply via Twitter

TIME.com
Web activism helps shut down abusive boot camp schools, like one which forced girls into lap dances for "therapy" |
Today, 8:20:02 AM – Reply via Twitter

Vale Gonzalez
What?! RT @TIME: Web activism helps shut down abusive schools, like one which forced girls into lap dances for "therapy"
Today, 8:24:57 AM – Reply via Twitter

Amy Ferguson
ha! RT @TIME: Web activism helps shut down abusive camp schools, which forced girls into lap dances for "therapy" |
Today, 8:26:56 AM – Reply via Twitter

Neile Jones
RT @TIME: Web activism helps shut down abusive boot camp schools, like one which forced girls n2lap dances 4 "therapy"
Today, 8:30:03 AM – Reply via Twitter

Artist
"@TIME: activism helps shut down abusive boot camp schools, like one which forced girls into lap dances for "therapy" | "

Today, 8:31:23 AM – Reply via Twitter

Liam Cahill
I shared this on Twitter...
Today, 5:51:09 AM – Reply via Twitter

Bente Hansson
We who have lost our kids to the Danish foster care system have noticed how well it has worked and will now try to copy it. The Danish system is totally out of control.

The politicians have no control over their own employees. The number of children in foster care is close to ruining the cities.

Parents who lose their children to the system have to use a lot of money to pass two boards controlled largely by employees from the department of social services before they can appeal to the courts and get their kids back who by then is often hurt by the system.

In Denmark we have LOS just as you in America has NATSAP. Like you have so-called educational consultant who are paid to find problems so they can get their referral fees, none in Denmark know how the social workers find the often boot camp styled group homes they choose to place their client in. We are talking 50,000 DKK for one child per month or more. A lot of money where the politicians should let Auditors look at the transaktions so they can find out what the social workers get in return.

I am happy that the Internet and general knowledge has resulted in these closures. As I wrote above, it is time for us in Denmark to copy your approach, so children can be saved and remain with their parents instead of being put into foster care just because a social worker wants to make a career.
Today, 1:13:01 AM – Reply
Liked by FELICE ELISCU Matt Hoffman

Matt Hoffman
I have drunk to the memories of my friends that did not survive. I have helped utilize the power of the internet by posting the truth about Elan (since Dec 15 ,2001 on Fornits.com and more recently on face book) I am sorry to say I have not emblished or exaggerated in my posts anywhere about Elan. If this exposed Elan and shut it down along with the many others, then so be it.

I have no desire to get involved with the lunacy of the "you are lying ", or your debate of how it was "so good" and you can't see it because "you were so sick to begin with" ,debate. I know what went down. The directors know what went down. They know that I have put down in words what Elan was and what its directors did during my time there.

Elan is closed, (and the two directors that worked there when I was there and until it closed last week) Jeffery Gottlieb and Martin Kruglik , know I am part of the reason for its closing, and that to me is priceless. I am not going to carry their guilt or their shame for them ever again. That is uniquely their's and their's alone , as is their legacy and the legacy of Elan.

To those that I knew that are dead , I miss you. To those that roam the earth haunted by the nightmares of Elan , I wish you much comfort, understanding ,and continued healing and I will tell you ,you will make it.

To Elan and its former employees that helped run it ,"if mercy is in business then I wish it for you ", for, "it is a short time to be here ,and a long ,long time to be gone".

Peace

Matt C. Hoffman
Yesterday, 5:44:53 PM – Reply
Liked by FELICE ELISCU

Buddy Cozart
Increasingly, Internet Activism Helps Shutter Abusive 'Troubled Teen' Boot Camps
Yesterday, 3:56:40 PM – Reply via Twitter
Liked by FELICE ELISCU Reddit TroubledTeens Matt Hoffman

James - DUI
Increasingly, Internet Activism Helps Shutter Abusive 'Troubled Teen' Boot Camps

Today, 2:37:21 AM – Reply via Twitter

Reddit TroubledTeens
Reddit is working to close more facilities! Join us at http://www.reddit.com/r/troubledteens/

Fantastic article, congrats to all who worked so hard to close Elan. You did it!!
Yesterday, 3:55:19 PM – Reply
Liked by FELICE ELISCU Matt Hoffman

DisabilityRtsOR
Increasingly, Internet Activism Helps Shutter Abusive 'Troubled Teen' Boot Camps via @TIMEHealthland
Yesterday, 2:51:11 PM – Reply via Twitter
Liked by Reddit TroubledTeens

CAFETY
CAFETY's quoted!
Yesterday, 2:33:17 PM – Reply via Twitter
Liked by David Krug FELICE ELISCU Reddit TroubledTeens Matt Hoffman

David Krug
Awesome I firmly believe programs such as the one I've been fighting to close just need more national exposure.

I look forward to finally see the day when NO unlicensed, unsupervised programs exist in the United States and children can live without fear of institutional abuse.

http://standingincorners.com
Yesterday, 2:32:23 PM – Reply
Liked by FELICE ELISCU Reddit TroubledTeens Matt Hoffman

FELICE ELISCU
Thank You Maia for all that you do.
Yesterday, 2:07:39 PM – Reply
Liked by Reddit TroubledTeens Matt Hoffman