

Abbeville school had role in rise and fall of enterprise for serving troubled teens

By Kirk Brown

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DUE WEST — A boarding school reopening near Due West next year was previously part of a thriving network of facilities for troubled teens reaching from California to the Czech Republic.

Parents were eager to send their out-of-control adolescents to tough-love boarding schools like Carolina Springs Academy in Abbeville County. The facility, which filled to capacity soon after opening, was among more than a dozen institutions affiliated with the Utah-based Worldwide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools.

At one point, tuition payments topped \$90 million annually from students enrolled in behavior-modification programs designed by Worldwide's founder, Robert Lichfield.

Worldwide's boarding school empire has crumbled in recent years.

Under pressure from state regulators, Carolina Springs closed in 2009. It intends to reopen next year as a coed Christian boarding school without any ties to Worldwide, which also is known as WWASPS.

Worldwide President Ken Kay said WWASPS is "out of business." He blamed the recession and media coverage of abuse allegations, arrests, raids and two students' deaths for contributing to its demise.

WASPS still exists on paper, he explained, so that its insurance company will keep paying the attorneys who are defending Worldwide in ongoing lawsuits.

The highest profile case is a federal suit involving 353 parents and former students. The suit accuses WWASPS and its affiliates — including Carolina Springs — of assault, battery, false imprisonment, fraud and racketeering.

Students at WWASPS boarding schools "were subjected to physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse," the suit alleges. "In many instances, the abuse could accurately be described as torture of children."

Categorically denying the accusations that Kay has called "ludicrous," Worldwide's attorneys have stymied the suit for four years with jurisdictional arguments and other procedural maneuvers.

Worldwide's attorneys also won a recent victory in Montana. Jurors ruled that WWASPS was not responsible for a 16-year-old girl's suicide at Spring Creek Lodge Academy in 2004.

Robert Lichfield launched Worldwide in 1998 – the same year his younger brother, Narvin, opened Carolina Springs Academy.

Worldwide's attorneys say WWASPS served as a "trade association" for independently owned member schools. Kay said Worldwide collected \$900 yearly for every student at these schools, which were charging upwards of \$36,000 for annual tuition.

But former school officials say at least 30 percent of the tuition income went to WWASPS and its related businesses to pay for parent seminars, billing, marketing and transportation fees.

"The money was not going into the facilities, professional staff or food," said journalist Maia Szalavitz, whose 2006 book "Help at Any Cost" focused on Worldwide.

As the boarding school business prospered, Robert Lichfield emerged as a prominent Republican Party donor and fundraiser. He collected \$300,000 for GOP presidential hopeful Mitt Romney at a 2007 event in St. George, Utah, the Salt Lake City Deseret Morning News reported. According to the paper, Lichfield later left Romney's campaign amid publicity regarding the lawsuit that parents and former students filed against Worldwide.

Robert Lichfield could not be reached for comment.

When Carolina Springs opened, some of its first students were American teens who had been staying at a boarding school in the Czech Republic called Morava Academy. Acting on a tip from an employee who said youths were being abused, Czech authorities raided the WASPS-affiliated facility in November 1998. A couple from Utah who were running the school were arrested on false imprisonment and cruelty charges.

The same couple had been jailed by Mexican officials in 1996 after a raid at a teen facility near Cancun, according to a series on boarding schools that Rocky Mountain News reporter Lou Kilzer wrote in 1999.

Kilzer's series also mentioned problems at Carolina Springs, including a student's complaint to state investigators about girls at the school being required to disrobe for "full body searches."

Students at Carolina Springs said the staff members frequently threatened to send misbehaving youths to an even harsher boarding school in Jamaica called Tranquility Bay. In 2001, 16-year-old Valerie Heron died when she fractured her skull in two places after leaping off a 35-foot balcony at Tranquility Bay, which was run by Ken Kay's son, Jay.

In a 2003 story in The New York Times, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Tim Weiner said students described a “life of pain and fear” at Tranquility Bay. His story said some youths at the school spent 13 hours a day lying on their stomachs in an isolation room.

Kilzer, Weiner and other journalists also focused attention on the largest WWASPS affiliate, Spring Creek Lodge Academy in Thompson Falls, Mont.

The Deseret Morning News reported in 2004 that a former Spring Creek staff member pleaded guilty to a felony charge of criminal endangerment. He had originally been charged with sexual assault and sexual intercourse without permission stemming from allegations involving two teen boys, the newspaper reported.

A few months later, Spring Creek student Karlye Newman committed suicide. She hanged herself in a dormitory bathroom less than a week before her 17th birthday.

Newman’s mother sued WWASPS and the case went to trial in October. After listening to 2½ weeks of testimony, jurors took less than two hours to decide that Worldwide was not negligent in the girl’s death.

Years of negative publicity took a heavy toll on WWASPS and its member schools, Ken Kay said. But the recession proved even more lethal.

“The bad economy had a real profound effect,” Kay said.

As credit markets tightened and home values fell, parents could no longer take out second mortgages to pay for sending their children to boarding schools, Szalavitz said.

“That is one silver lining of this horrible economy,” she said.

Soon a number schools affiliated with Worldwide went out of business. Skyview Academy in Hawthorne, Nev., shut down in 2007 after the sexual hazing of a student. Royal Gorge Academy in Canon City, Col., closed its doors in 2008 following its former director’s conviction on charges of third-degree assault and false imprisonment. Carolina Springs, Spring Creek Lodge Academy and Tranquility Bay all closed in 2009.

These days Kay serves as the superintendent of the Browning Distance Learning Academy, which bills itself as “an alternative school for a quality education.”

Kay said his son Jay, the former director at Tranquility Bay, is dying of liver disease.

Meanwhile Narvin Lichfield is searching for investors so that he can reopen the former Carolina Springs Academy boarding school in 2011. Its new name will be Magnolia Christian School, he said.

Although he has severed financial ties with Robert Lichfield, Narvin Lichfield said his oldest brother has done admirable work saving troubled teens.

“We’ve helped 75,000 families,” Narvin Lichfield said.

Coalition Against Institutionalized Child Abuse founder Isabelle Zehnder came to a different conclusion after devoting a decade to posting media articles and reports about WWASPS on her group's website.

"There have been a whole lot of children who went through their programs who came out a whole lot worse than when they went in," Zehnder said.



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