

Controversy Surrounds Tranquility Bay

By Basia Pioro, *Caymanian Compass*, July 13, 2006

SOURCE: <http://www.caycompass.com/cgi-bin/CFPnews.cgi?ID=1014776>

Billed to have a positive effect on troubled young people aged 13 to 18 going through problems associated with the difficult teen years, the Tranquility Bay website states it is a “specialty boarding school and therapeutic behavioural modification facility, with an excellent academic program and therapy for kids who have been very defiant and hard to manage . . .”

The site describes how its program opens up new ways to help young people build character in order to achieve family peace and harmony.

The facility opened in 1997 and is in a remote area of Treasure Beach near St. Elizabeth, west of Kingston, on the premises of a former oceanfront hotel.

It is owned and operated by the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools, a 19-year old organization that holds about 2,400 children and youth ranging from seven to 18 in facilities in the United States, Jamaica and Mexico.

The benign name masks a different reality: In the past four years, five WWASP facilities, Casa by the Sea, Sunrise Beach and High Impact, all in Mexico, Dundee Ranch in Costa Rica, Morava in Czech Republic, and Paradise Cove in Western Samoa, have all been shut down for child abuse and neglect.

The High Impact Mexico operation was shut down when investigators discovered children being held in dog cages in the desert, reported John Gorenfeld of AlterNet.

Chris Goodwin of San Francisco said his son was forced to stay outside in his underpants for three nights at the Mexico

facility, lying on his stomach with his chin on the ground. If he moved to try to brush off fire ants that roamed over him, he was threatened with a cattle prod, said Goodwin. The punishment left scars on his son's chin, he said in a news story in the *Rocky Mountain News* (Colorado) in January 2002.

Comment forbidden

The accusations are surprising, considering they arose despite the fact that both children and parents are required to attend gruelling, emotionally draining multi-day training seminars where they must sign confidentiality agreements forbidding them to reveal what goes on both during the seminars and at the facilities.

These agreements have not stopped numerous students and parents from coming forward in recent years to tell about their experiences to media outlets around the world. The latest appeared in the [*Miami New Times*](#) on June 22.

What is not disputed is that at Tranquility Bay, children are placed in a points-based program with six levels, and are organized into families. They slowly gain rights and privileges by submitting to their superiors and admitting their accountability for their situations.

They are held without any outside communications with their real families for an initial period of three to six months, treated harshly, and subjected to physical and mental punishment, all with the objective of behaviour modification, according to the UK's *The Observer Magazine*.

Lodgings are modest. The students have no hot water, and sleep on wooden folding beds. They learn about obedience,

courtesy, healthy eating, and do self-directed schoolwork with the assistance of local staff. They watch inspirational tapes.

They attend Teen Accountability, Self-Esteem and Keys to Success seminars. They engage in group therapy sessions where they reveal personal secrets so they can progress through the program. Trained psychologists are only available for an additional fee. Graduation can take years.

Charging around US\$40,000 a year per student, the institution is permitted to operate unmolested in Jamaica as long as it abides by sanitary regulations. As for the treatment of the children, enrolment contracts transfer guardianship of children to Tranquility Bay, which permits staff to use physical restraint “if deemed necessary.”

Observation Placement

At Tranquility Bay, news documentaries and other media visits have confirmed that children who misbehave or disobey the complex set of rules are subject to Observation Placement.

In OP, children lie on their faces on a tile floor in a special room for 50 minutes an hour until they have fulfilled their allocated punishment and expressed remorse. By 2003, the restraining room record for one student was 18 months.

Organizations like International Survivors Action Committee, Nospark.net and Coalition Against

Children lie on their faces on a tile floor in a special room for 50 minutes an hour until they have fulfilled their allocated punishment and expressed remorse.

Institutionalized Child Abuse have documented WWASP's progress, in an effort to bring the issues surrounding their institutions to light.

In 2005, 23-year-old Layne Brown told a Missouri newspaper that during a nine-month stint at TB beginning in 1997, staff members made him defecate and urinate in a black garbage bag tied around his waist like a diaper, reported the *Miami New Times* on 22, June, 2006. They also, he says, dragged him across a cement floor face-down, scrubbed his genitals with a hard-bristle toilet brush and pepper-sprayed him.

In 2003 Layne described the mistreatment to a French film company at his home in Kanab, Utah, for a documentary titled Tranquility Bay. The film also includes an interview with a man identified as former TB assistant director Randall Hinton, who stated he and Jay Kay used pepper spray. "I think I can remember Layne being pepper-sprayed more than once a day. I know he was pepper-sprayed more than two times a day. I don't think it would have been more than three times ... and from somebody on the outside looking in, I would say it would be abusive."

Yet TB owner and director Jay Kay has said that corporal punishment is not practiced at TB and the use of pepper spray was abolished in 1998. "Anyone who saw inside Tranquility would support and admire it," he said in 2003, blaming criticism on ignorance. "Nothing has really presented things in a way that is factual," reported the *Miami New Times*.

Mr. Brown spent two years in a mental hospital after leaving Tranquility Bay and died 6 June, 2006.

In a strange coincidence, Carter Lynn, featured in the *Miami New Times* story, hanged himself at home 7 June, 2006.

What happens to students once they leave WWASP facilities is not officially tracked, but CAICA has been following the progress of high-profile cases on their website.

Typical WWASP students are teens who certainly have made bad choices, but are guilty of transgressions like running with the wrong crowd, choosing inappropriate boyfriends, or getting caught smoking ganja.

A large majority come from dysfunctional or divorced-parent families. Many are taken from their beds, handcuffed, by guards who hustle them to the airport before they can say goodbye to their parents, The Observer Magazine reports.

CAICA claims that desperate parents, in their haste and succumbing to a sense of hopelessness in dealing with their wayward children, lured by slick sales pitches and coercion techniques, are convinced to send their children to WWASP facilities in the belief it will solve their problems.

Researchers say the coercion methods WWASP employs on both students and parents are based on Maoist re-education techniques used on American GIs in the Korean War. These became popular in 1970s North America in the form of large group awareness training, Mind Dynamics, or what psychologists call coercive persuasion, all intended to achieve behaviour modification by changing the subject's perception of reality. Often, subjects play along in order to feign progress as an exit strategy.

In response to criticism, WWASPs says: "The schools have a tremendous record of success and growth. They have helped thousands of teens and their families and have a 97 per cent parent satisfaction rate."

Amid the rising tide of criticism about WWASP facilities, the

Cayman Islands government continues to allocate budget funds to send selected youth to Tranquility Bay.

Good faith

Although accounts of the sequence of events differ in certain respects, it appears that the relationship between the Cayman Islands government and Tranquility Bay was formed in good faith.

House Speaker Edna Moyle was Minister Youth in 2001. She recalled that a British Overseas Territory inspector was concerned about the youth detention facilities in use at that time in West Bay and ordered them closed, creating a problem with housing and rehabilitating certain troubled youth.

Roy Bodden was Education Minister in 2001. He visited Tranquility Bay on a Cayman Islands Government fact-finding mission with Mrs. Moyle, and Children & Youth Services Director Deana Look Loy. He was there to assess the facility's educational aspects, with regard to both teaching and behaviour modification techniques.

During the initial visit, Mrs. Look Loy, Mrs. Moyle and Mr. Bodden met Jamaican Director of Children and Family Services Sir Winston Bowen in St. Elizabeth.

Mr. Bowen spoke with them at length, and spent a considerable amount of time explaining the program and the Jamaican government's supportive position.

The parties agreed that if the Cayman Islands sent children to Tranquility Bay, they could be reassured that Jamaica was monitoring the facility very closely, and that Jamaican Department of Children and Family Services social workers

would monitor the children.

Mr. Bodden recalled that the facility was not without controversy at the time.

“But I got a good impression during that visit,” he said. “The facility staff were very frank and open and I don’t think we were deprived of seeing any areas, including the restraining room. We also had the chance to have a forthright discussion with some of the young people there, and I liked what I saw.”

He says that upon their return, the group discussed their impressions and unanimously agreed Tranquility Bay was an appropriate facility for the Department of Social Services’ needs and produced a report for the Ministry recommending its use.

Mr. Bodden said his decision had also been informed from hearing that some Caymanians had privately sent their children to Tranquility Bay with good results.

He had also received the confidential opinions of his colleagues in the Jamaican social services, which led him to believe the decision was the right one at the time.

No Jamaican students

Mr. Bodden said he did notice that the facility had no Jamaican students and that the senior staff was all American, while only the more junior staff were Jamaicans, which he thought curious.

In fact, the Jamaican government did not and still does not permit Jamaican students to attend Tranquility Bay.

When questioned about some of the allegations about Tranquility Bay, Mr. Bodden acknowledged his awareness of

cases where children claimed they were kidnapped.

“It was immediately clear to us that there were a lot of kids from wealthy American families,” he said. “It’s certainly possible parents were trying to avoid the publicity and embarrassment a troubled teen would bring and they could quietly get rid of them that way.”

Mr. Bodden said that although the Education Department was involved in the children’s educational welfare, Social Services made the call about sending children there, based on a combination of certain behaviour challenges and learning challenges.

Mr. Bodden says Tranquility Bay staff had informed them that they would likely hear about negative experiences, but they were told that many would be fabricated and overblown accounts by students wishing to use one divorced parent against the other to gain sympathy and return home.

Mr. Bodden says the team found it reassuring that children at the facility appeared to come from good backgrounds and the environment was beneficial.

“At the time, the Government was convinced they were getting good value for the money,” he said. “Tranquility Bay was tough, it was isolated, so these students, by being separated from society, had a good opportunity to reflect on what they had done and choose to make a change.”

Visa issues

Frank McField became Minister of Youth in late 2001 and travelled to Tranquility Bay in 2002. As he recalled, the Government’s relationship with the facility began because the family of a child who would have been sent to Juvenile

Detention advocated to be sent to the school instead.

“At the time, the Cayman Islands had a visa relationship with the US, which allowed us to send children to reform school in the States, but regulations changed so that if they had a prior criminal record they wouldn’t be granted a visa,” he said

“That barred any children with records from attending US reform schools and prevented anyone with a criminal record from ever gaining a visa to the US, which motivated this family to propose Tranquility Bay as an alternative.”

The family had approached the previous Minister and the government invited a Tranquility Bay delegation to the Cayman Islands to make a presentation.

He says that was what motivated the original fact-finding trip with Mrs. Moyle, Mrs. Look Loy and Mr. Bodden. “And once the decision was made that the place was fine, they started sending kids there as part of social services sentences.”

On his visit in 2002, Mr. McField says he only had a visitor’s view, but what made the greatest impression on him was the remoteness, which supported the program’s concept of isolating the predominantly American students from society, which he had no problem with.

Mr. McField says that it was up to the courts to decide how to remand children. To be considered for Tranquility Bay, they would have had to have committed a series of offences, have really serious problems and be beyond control of their parents, because it was such an expensive place.

“At the same time, parents who were no longer willing to be responsible, who had given up, were asking social services to deal with their kids for them as well,” he said.

“Of course, private people were also doing it, but due to the high cost, only privileged children in general were sent there privately.

“Certainly, the harsh methods they use there are not 100 per cent appropriate for every child,” he admitted. “But we were assured that certain people were responsible for making sure things didn’t go too far.”

Prefers US

He regrets that better facilities in the United States could not be used as a result of the visa issue, as he did not find the students sent to Tranquility Bay were completely changed.

“However, we did find that some students had clearly learned their attitude and demeanour could be a choice they could make when it was appropriate,” he said.

“Knowing and learning to use these choices was key and Tranquility Bay was successful in that regard.”

Mr. McField says that while he was only involved with high-level policy decisions for the most part, he does remember, and regret, one case involving a girl who was sent to Tranquility Bay.

“That school was for youth who were acting out, aggressive or disturbed,” he said. “That was not the case with her. The type of treatment in military-style, regimented places like this leaves no room for other methods that would more effectively benefit certain kids.”

Harsh words

At the recent UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Cayman Islands workshop, Children and Family Services Director Deana Look Loy had tougher words about the facility.

Family Services Director Deana Look Loy: "The children we have sent there have not done well... They missed their families and were miserable."

"The children we have sent there have not done well," she said. "They missed their families and were miserable."

Tranquility Bay is intended to reprogram children so that they have better relationships with their families when they get out, but Mrs. Look Loy said the system is ineffective.

"The reason why we have had to send children overseas over the years is because our resources here are quite limited. When these children exhaust all that we have, we have no choice but to seek the kind of therapy and services they need outside the Island," she said.

"So, for some time we have been sending them to Jamaica, and to the US, but we really would like our own on-Island facilities and programs to address our children's needs."

She said sending children away defeats the purpose of strengthening the family relationships many of these troubled youth lack.

"It is indisputable that it is better for us to work with them at home, in a setting where their families are, as they have to go back to those families anyway."

Mrs. Look Loy says that while a budget allocation has been made for another potential student, the former allocation of \$100,000 has been redirected to building a Cayman-based facility that would fill their needs.

She says the Department of Children and Family Services has already put together a proposal and presented it to the Chief Secretary.

Minister Eden confirmed that a previous proposal for a state of the art secure rehabilitation and education facility he was involved with died on the table a number of years ago. He supports the recent move and the family-based socially-oriented rationale behind it.

“In the end, we have to work with the parents, because a lot of the issues are between the parents and the children, and it’s usually because of some form of family dysfunction that the children have reached the stage where they are,” said Mrs. Look Loy. “With a few exceptions, the majority of children are victims of their circumstances.”

Ms. Look Loy emphasized that despite the potential for local objections to Tranquility Bay, none have arisen. She says the intention to eventually stop sending children to Jamaica was a decision the department made on its own.

“It is because whatever was done with them didn’t really change them,” she said. “Children wrote frequently, they told the psychologist frequently, that their parents don’t call them, they don’t hear from their parents, they missed their brothers and sisters. If they’re troubled in that manner, they are not going to respond to the therapy.”

Return to:

[Newsroom](#)

[Boot camp for kids: Torturing teens for fun and profit](#)

[Front Page](#)