



No More Nightmares at Tranquility Bay?

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From the Czech Republic to Costa Rica and Mexico, cops have seized American overseers for caging or mistreating American teens at harsh "boot camps" run under foreign flags to escape U.S. law.

But here at home, the companies that ship teenagers to remote reform schools can freely go about their business in many states. You can dial 1-800-355-TEEN to reach the sales staff of Teen Help, LLC, who can arrange for your child to be spirited away. They might put you in touch with "escorts," guys who can pull up to your driveway in a van and transport even the most defiant child to the airport. The next destination is up to you: a "tough love" school here in the 50 states, like Majestic Ranch in Utah or Spring Creek Lodge Academy in Montana?

Or perhaps Tranquility Bay, a barbed-wire discipline facility in Jamaica, where some of the approximately 250 teens can find themselves confined against their will and marched around by guards. Only the devil stands in the way of your consumer choice. The devil, that is, and a lone congressman, Rep. George Miller, D-Calif.

Just ask Ken Kay. He's the president of the tightly knit group of Utah men who run these outposts with their families, under the umbrella company World-Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASPS), whose leaders, critics say, try to hide their role in running the schools by running them under different names. Ken's son Jay, a college dropout who ran a mini-mart in San Diego, now oversees Tranquility Bay, where he had admitted to the media that he squirted pepper spray on his charges in the past.

As a teen at Tranquility Bay, you can't call home and are escorted between rooms by Jamaican "chaperones." Talk out of turn and your punishment might be that a trio of guards wrestles you to the ground. "They start twisting and pulling your limbs, grinding your ankles," a student told the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Not knowing when you'll go home, you might take cold showers and watch "emotional growth" videos. The promise is that you will return a respectful, happy teen. But many WWASPS alumni who've banded together at online survivor websites like Tranquility Bay Fight and Fornits say their lives haven't been saved, they've been devastated.

Several WWASPS schools have been shut down after abuse claims. Tranquility Bay's counterpart, High Impact, a WWASP affiliate in Mexico, closed in 2002 after dark stories emerged. Teens said they were kept in dog cages. Two parents, Chris Goodwin and Stephanie Hecker, told the *Rocky Mountain News* their children were made to lie in their underwear for three nights with fire ants roaming over them and were threatened with a cattle prod if they scratched.

In December, Rep. Miller asked Congress's nonpartisan General Accounting Office (GAO) to launch a fact-finding probe into similar schools, claiming the \$1.2 billion teen rehabilitation clinic industry is shrouded in secrecy. Miller's office is awaiting word from the GAO on the investigation request. After a call to the GAO, AlterNet was told no decision had been made yet as to whether to launch the study, which would look into whether the industry was receiving special tax treatment or using fraudulent marketing techniques. Asked why he requested the probe, Rep. Miller explained, "Far too little is known about the so-called 'behavior modification' industry, even as it has surged in size since the 1990s, and that is why I have asked the GAO to review it... There is no excuse for allowing children to be placed in unlicensed programs where their physical or emotional health is jeopardized."

But company president Kay told AlterNet he questioned the congressman's motives. "I think that he must just want to be powerful, or seen as, 'oh, the guy that saved all these children from abuse,'" says Kay. "My fear is that he has a vendetta."

The WWASPS schools rake in about \$80 million a year. Claiming to enlist about 1,250 students (the official number has dropped from 2,500 in 2003), the company schools are part of a wider industry, estimated to hold 10,000 teenagers, that is rarely covered by the news media.

Miller, senior Democrat on the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce, is pushing for a bill, H.R. 1738, to increase state licensing of the teen control trade and hold Americans who run foreign discipline schools accountable to U.S. laws. Company president Kay, however, suggested Miller may also have a partisan, anti-Republican motive against WWASPS.

It's true that WWASPS is generous to the GOP. The schools and "teen transport" company are run by a web of cell-like corporate entities that deny their interconnectedness -- but share family members, billing addresses and other obvious signs of affiliation. At the top is founder Bob Lichfield, who lives in Utah on a posh ranch, his lifestyle and political presence fueled by tuition payments. According to the *Salt Lake City Tribune* Bob Lichfield and his family and business associates have given given over \$1 million to GOP politics at the local and national level.

The lobbying seems to have paid off. Seeing as how the National Mental Health Association has categorically condemned juvenile boot camps as counterproductive "bullying," the goal would appear to be keeping oversight out of the hands of mental health experts. Like some timber companies and others, a number of "troubled teen" companies have promoted the idea that they should be their own watchdogs. While the rules are tightening this year in Utah, a frontier is opening in Montana. As Michelle Chen reported in the *NewStandard*, a pro-WWASPS plan is winning out in the state over a tougher one, coinciding with WWASPS school Spring Creek Lodge Academy's \$50,000 lobbying push to water down the rules. Instead of the state Department of Health, the new plan lets industry insiders watch over schools such as Spring Creek and others. And there will be exemptions for "faith-based" schools.

So far, WWASPS hasn't chosen the God loophole, but its officials attach such religious zeal to teen control that the "faith-based" label would fit the company snugly. "Do I believe that God is finding a way for teens to get help? I do," Lichfield

once told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Do I believe that Satan is interested in thwarting it? I do." Asked in December about his boss's remarks, Kay waxed philosophical: "If you have a spiritual side, I think you can truly believe that there may be some adversarial part of our nature and makeup that gets involved." Then there are other adversaries, some of whom Kay has called "wackos" -- a steady parade of unhappy mothers and teens, as well as the pesky foreign cops who have arrested camp leaders at Kay's schools for "human rights violations."

The company has spent the last decade trailblazing an unregulated frontier. Like manufacturers, they've outsourced to foreign countries which have different laws and standards. A predecessor like STRAIGHT, Inc., from 1976 to 1993 the foremost teenage drug rehab outfit in America, was driven out of business by liability and sued for false imprisonment and manhandling of children. But as industry watchers have discovered, the early 1990s saw new business models emerging for "tough love." WWASPS' approach has been a goldmine. By splintering its business empire into fragments -- including Teen Help, Adolescent Services, Inc., and Teen Escort (the teen retrieval arm) -- it has received much more leeway to conceal accountability and money trails, its critics argue. Draw a map of the network, Utah state prosecutor Craig Barlowe told the *New York Times* in 2003, and you'll see "a lateral arabesque with no hub except for these connections in Utah." Barlowe was pursuing a child abuse charge against the director of a WWASP-affiliated school at the time.

On the consumer end, parents are offered thousands of dollars in sales incentives for finding new kids or promoting WWASP schools, the *New York Times* has reported. The schools' hunger for pupils has created a proliferation of promotional websites -- like FamilyFirstAid.org -- beckoning mom and dad to ship the kid to the "friendly tourist Island [sic]" of Tranquility Bay, the "prime forest land" of WWASPS' Spring Creek Lodge and other pleasurable-sounding destinations. (As author Maia Szalavitz documents in her upcoming book, *Help at Any Cost*, at WWASPS program Paradise Cove in Samoa, which is now shuttered, kids caught scabies, and guards confined bad kids to a 3 feet by 3 feet plywood chamber that teens referred to as "The Box.")

School of hard knocks

Two Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters, Lou Kilzer of the *Rocky Mountain News* and Tim Weiner of the *New York Times* have written exposes of the kennel cages, bug infestations, unqualified staff and confinement to punishment rooms that have been passed off under the Harry Potter-esque language of "boarding school." Rep. Miller's spokesman Tom Kiley said that substandard education is just one of the areas of concern that the GAO needs to help resolve about WWASPS and the wider industry. This August, one facility with the prestigious name "Academy at Ivy Ridge" in New York had to refund more than \$1 million after pretending to offer legitimate high school diplomas.

WWASPS eludes the attention and regulation it might receive if its institutions were presented as health care facilities instead of schools. There is little to show for them as high-water marks in American education, however; when not being bombarded with Tony Robbins motivational tapes, kids learn by rote and fill out multiple-choice tests. While a promotional website claims that "more than 80 percent of the

graduates of these programs go on to attend some of the best universities and professional schools in the country," Kay didn't respond to a request for an example of a student at an Ivy League or other top school. Referring to WWASPS-affiliated institutions, Maia Szalavitz said admissions officers are unlikely to be impressed by the education, which not only stresses conformity over critical thinking but can include long stays in solitary confinement.

Over two years ago, Rep. Miller was turned down by then-Attorney General John Ashcroft when he asked him to investigate possible crimes revealed in the *New York Times* reports. "Congressman Miller sees this as a top priority," says Miller's spokesman Kiley. "The promise is that your child is going to be treated with respect, and that these are the people meant to help them. In fact, the opposite is happening."

The money linking WWASPS and Republicans, says Kiley, "definitely sends up red flags," but he wouldn't go so far as to claim a web of connections. Miller's proposed End Institutional Abuse Against Children Act, would give states \$50 million to help license schools, establish new criminal and civil penalties for leaders of abusive programs and let the government regulate overseas camps that are presently beyond the arm of the law. Right now, the State Department warns that it "has no authority to regulate these entities."

Company president Kay, however, told AlterNet that local authorities already do a "great job" regulating the schools.

Under Montana's new plan, that board, dominated by industry insiders, will be responsible for making sure companies avoid some of what has befallen WWASPS's 450-teen Spring Creek Lodge Academy campus in Thompson Falls, Mont., in the last three years. Such as the time that Karlye Anne Newman from Denver, days shy of 17, hanged herself in a bunkhouse there in 2004. Or making sure the firm doesn't again allow a man like former employee Keith Wood, 31, in the proximity of troubled youth. Wood last February went to nearby Plains and shot a romantic rival seven times with a Glock pistol before turning the weapon on himself.

According to a 2004 report in the *Missoula Independent* that re-opened Karlye's forgotten death, the kids are forbidden to speak of her suicide -- or spread tales of Jamaica, a distant island that looms over them as a fate worse than Montana. "That's a Cat-4," a student said when the paper asked about the dead girl. "We can't talk about Karlye." A card around the student's neck helpfully informed the reporter that a Cat-4 meant losing rank in the program, meaning staying longer at the camp and costing dad thousands more in tuition. Tuition at the lodge runs at about \$40,680 a year, a typical figure for these schools.

Abuse, says Kay, doesn't happen anymore often than in the public school system. "That doesn't mean we're gonna shut down the public schools," he said.

Unless, of course, if your middle school principal kept girls in multi-day "stress positions" similar to the kind approved by Donald Rumsfeld for use on Muslim prisoners. As Maia Szalavitz relates in "Help At Any Cost," that was the case at a WWASPS school for girls in Mexico. It was called Sunset Beach and was shut down after being raided by local police in 1996. Authorities seized and later released

overseers Glenda and Steve Roach. A company official blamed "the local legal system" for the ensuing closure of the school.

But across the world in the Czech Republic, two years later, authorities reached similar conclusions after finding that the WWASPS-affiliated Morava Academy was holding kids in windowless rooms and forcing them to remain on their stomachs for days. Czech cops arrested and released the overseers on bail for illegal imprisonment and torture, the British Guardian reported.

The accused were the Roaches, the same people arrested in Mexico. At press time AlterNet could not locate the Roaches for comment or determine the outcome of their case, though industry watchdog group International Survivors Action Committee has claimed to have located them in the Bahamas living under new names. Czech press reports paint a cloudy picture as to their whereabouts, with Glenda leaving the country before trial on a health waiver, and Steven "at large" to avoid criminal investigation, according to Radio Prague and other sources.

But somehow, according to WWASPS officials' statements to the press, it was the teens' fault for being "master manipulators" who'd tricked the European officials into thinking there was abuse. In 2003, a dramatic teen uprising in Costa Rica at the company's Dundee Ranch school brought WWASPS to the attention of *Times* national security reporter Tim Weiner. The uprising began after a visit by Costa Rican officials, who told students they had more rights under local law than WWASPS allowed them. "They told us you have the right to speak, you have the right to speak to your parents, you have the right to leave if you feel you've been mistreated," 17-year-old Hugh Maxwell told the *Times*. "Kids heard that and they started running for the door. There was elation, cheering and clapping and chaos. People were crying."

Six people told the *Times* that staff beat the children to stop them from leaving. As order collapsed, Costa Ricans seized control and hauled off the founder's brother, Narvin Lichfield, in handcuffs for holding kids against their will, releasing him a day later. In a statement, the company complained that the Latin American prosecutor, with his "Rambo-like tactics," had told kids they could "do whatever they wanted, without consequences." According to the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Narvin Lichfield was charged in Costa Rica with "aggravated privation of liberty, coercion and international crimes." A Costa Rican judge ordered him to stay in the country for six months, but ultimately Lichfield did not stand trial.

An evil world without consequences, populated by lying teens, is what WWASPS's officials and pro-company parents often say they're up against, a nearly metaphysical threat. Participating families must attend motivational seminars on the struggle. Ex-participant Karen Lile, a piano seller in Northern California, has written an essay alleging that she suffered "distress and emotional shock" from a Teen Help "discovery seminar" she attended at a Holiday Inn which, she wrote, encouraged her to keep her child in the program. Witnesses at similar events describe the atmosphere as rising to the fever pitch of religious revival road shows, with adults wailing and beating on chairs.

So how are mom and dad talked into keeping their kids at a foreign detention

center? The pamphlets for one Teen Help-affiliated school show kids playing basketball and wandering amid natural wonders, rediscovering lost innocence. As long as parents ignore the small letters warning, "Not all Photos [sic] taken at the facility," they can tell themselves they are buying a snooty private education.

And they are told it's this or death on the streets. "If your child needed a kidney transplant to save their life, you would come up with the money," Kay said. "If the value of your child's life isn't worth the cost of a new car " And they're warned not to believe teens who may spin tall tales of abuse. After a high school basketball player named Paul Richards was sent to Paradise Cove in Samoa, Szalavitz recounts in her book, his parents received a newsletter, "WHUTZ UP in Paradise Cove," offering a lesson in how to avoid being "manipulated" by letters from the front.

The lesson presents a sample letter reading, in part: "It is not the camp you promised ... The [program staff] are mean and beat me when I do something they don't like."

Parents are encouraged to write back with dispassionate jargon: "Work your program."

The young basketballer later told Szalavitz that "working" his own \$2,000-a-month "program" meant letting groups of shaved-headed teens belittle him for refusing to "see the light" and be grateful. "They just circle you up, and they all start yelling at you at the same time and say how shitty a person you were," he said. "'You're worthless, you're pathetic, you're a piece of shit, you're a compulsive liar and nobody likes you,' just basically stuff 'til they broke down your self-esteem."

Was a shipment to the Jamaica security complex appropriate for a teenage girl who'd been sleeping around? Kay, asked the question, stressed that being flown to a school like Tranquility Bay is "a child's right." Teens "should expect that their parents have the right to step in on their behalf and make some decisions for them," he said. Some kids have entered WWASPS-affiliated schools for no infraction more serious than fighting with a stepmother. No court order is required.

Szalavitz says there's no evidence for the legitimacy of the "treatment" at most of the schools, which operate in a regulatory climate without consequences. As there is no research into long-term effects, she'd like to see studies done on whether any WWASPS alumni have been left with post-traumatic stress disorder. Some parents have described their kids' WWASPS transformations with language more "Dawn of the Dead" than "Dead Poets Society." Alex Ziperovich, 16, emerged from Spring Creek Lodge "35 pounds lighter, acting like a zombie," his mother, a Seattle attorney, told the *New York Times*.

Where's the outcry?

Why haven't stories like the ones by Weiner and Kilzer, Pulitzer winners both, caused a public outcry and swift government reaction? Do press accounts give WWASPS too much equal time? "It's a ridiculous way of covering things. We don't cover any other kind of health care that way," Szalavitz says, suggesting the press wouldn't be so charitable to non-doctors who claimed to have a new method for

extracting tumors. Most news features take the he-said-she-said approach familiar to us from recent reporting on Intelligent Design: "WWASPS isn't for everyone ..."
But, says Szalavitz, "This is not a story of 'some people go to this church, some people go to that church.'" Szalavitz added, "We're selling what they stamped out of psychiatric institutions 100 years ago."

Oddly enough, WWASPS president Ken Kay himself has raised unsettling questions about the programs Rep. Miller is waging his battle to regulate. During a period in 2002 when he'd split with WWASPS, he told the *Rocky Mountain News*' Kilzer: "These people are basically a bunch of untrained people who work for this organization. So they don't have any credentials of any kind. We could be leading these kids to long-term problems that we don't have a clue about because we're not going about it in the proper way ... How in the hell can you call yourself a behavior-modification program -- and that's one of the ways it's marketed -- when nobody has the expertise to determine, is this good, is this bad?"

Kay has since rejoined WWASPS as president. Asked in an email interview in December whether his concerns had since been calmed since 2002, Kay said he was quoted out of context. "Nobody [calmed] my worries for children," he wrote back. "There are trained authorities that deal with abuse. All necessary systems are in place ..."

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