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Hurricane youth center founder opens up about recent runaways and conditional licensing

By Nick Yamashita
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HURRICANE — In recent weeks, Three Points Center, a youth treatment facility in Hurricane, has been the subject of news headlines involving runaway teens in two separate incidents.



Three Points Center Founder and Owner Dr. Norm Thibault, Hurricane, Utah, Date unspecified | Photo courtesy of Three Points Center, St. George News

"They are a challenging group to work with, but definitely worthwhile," Norm Thibault said of the youth who are treated at the center.

Thibault is the founder and owner of Three Points Center. He holds a Ph.D. and has about 30 years of experience as a licensed marriage and family therapist, with multiple accreditations for psychology, family and marriage therapy.

The treatment center sits on approximately 200 acres of land about 6 miles above Hurricane to the southeast of state Route 59. The

facility is surrounded by undeveloped desert, including sagebrush, soft-fine sand and black rock lava cliffs, with some of the cliffs featuring drops of approximately 100 feet.

The center has two ponds, horse barns, pastures, horse training pens and an open athletic-type field with several large buildings, which include administration offices, residential facilities and classrooms. The property is well-maintained, with abundant animal life, including birds, ducks and horses.

There is no chain-link fencing designed to keep people in or out surrounding the facility, only a three-rail fence made out of logs.

The runaway incidents

In the first incident occurring during the weekend of Aug. 19, a group of students ran away from Three Points Center, but authorities found most



throughout the weekend. However, two of them, a 14-year-old girl and a 16-year-old boy, were still missing and reported to law enforcement on Aug. 22.

The teens were found unharmed and returned to the treatment center within a couple of days, shortly after media reports were published about the runaways.

The second incident occurred when two teenage girls were reported missing from Three Points Center after running away Aug. 23. They were located unharmed in Mesquite, Nevada, on Aug. 25 at about 7:30 p.m. by local authorities and returned to the center.

"Basically, we had those kids who made it a game were returned safely. We found all of them, but it created some real stress for our people," Thibault told St. George News. "We've got wonderful people who pour out their hearts on this campus for these kids."

Special considerations for adoptive children

"All of our students are adopted," Thibault said, explaining that Three Points is the first treatment center of its kind to work exclusively with adopted children.

Adopted children, especially those coming from the foster system, present complex diagnoses that are related to developmental trauma, Thibault said.



"The circuitry of their brains has been altered because of pre-birth trauma and post-birth trauma. They are very quick to respond and very quick to act," Thibault said. "Their limbic system is really running 100 miles an hour to keep them safe because they weren't safe in the trust of people before."

Thibault said there are many societal misconceptions about marginalized children like those they treat.

Three Points Center has two ponds where youth can do a number of recreational activities, including rowing, meditating, and even fishing, among other activities, Hurricane, Utah, Sept. 1, 2022 | Photo by Nick Yamashita, St. George News

"There are not any bad kids. ... There are kids in emotional pain who sometimes wonder why they act the way they act," he said.

When determining the appropriate way to handle runaways, Thibault said the interpretation of a new state law has created some challenges for facility staff.

"One of the challenges we have had is the ambiguity in some of the law," he said. Senate Bill 127 was signed into law by Gov. Spencer Cox on March 22, 2021, and became effective April 6, 2021. The bill was advocated by celebrity Paris Hilton, who said she suffered abuse at Provo Canyon School when she was 17. The law placed new restrictions and enforced new policies regarding youth treatment centers, wilderness therapy programs, boarding schools and other similar programs.

The law made changes in human services programs, especially pertaining to licensing and methods of discipline, including when and when not to use physical restraint. One of the main focuses is on the tactics used on residents and patients in youth treatment programs. Allegations of physical, mental and sexual abuse have come forth about such programs.

The law requires the Office of Licensing under the Department of Health and Human Services to do the following, among other stipulations:

- describe when a congregate care program may use a restraint or seclusion;
- require a congregate care program to maintain suicide prevention policies;
- prohibit a human services program from engaging in sex and gender-based discrimination.

Because of the environment of the campus, prior to SB 127, staff would walk with the youth attempting to run away to the edge of campus, while trying to verbally de-escalate the situation. Once at the edge of the property line, the staff would warn them that for their safety, if they leave the campus, they would have to restrain them.

When SB 127 came into effect, the office of licensing came to the center and said the staff can no longer use restraints. If students choose to run off campus, unless they know they are at imminent risk or danger, the staff cannot stop them.

In Thibault's observation, this created a problem.

"No one wanted to define 'imminent,'" Thibault said. "To me, because I have 100-foot cliffs behind the dorms, they're running at night ... that's imminent. We have a wild desert out there."

The desert is also home to wildlife, including rattlesnakes, coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats and scorpions, not to mention the often extreme heat during the day and the sudden drop in temperature during the night. It is also almost pitch black at night.

"So we were told, 'You can't stop them,' and they told the kids, 'Unless you are in imminent harm, they can't stop you or put hands on you to stop you,'" Thibault said. "So, to our kids, it became a game. They started to see who could get the farthest away and be the longest gone."



One of the ponds at the Three Points Center sits near black rock cliffs that could be considered an imminent risk to youth. Hurricane, Utah, Sept. 1, 2022 | Photo by Nick Yamashita, St. George News

He said a TikTok trend has been encouraging youth to go missing for 48 hours. The trend is known as the "runaway challenge" or the "48 hours missing challenge," among other names. The trend started in California in early 2019. Since then, the time of the trend has become longer or varies according to the TikTok user who issues the challenge.

"Long story short, the kids, we couldn't stop them," Thibault said.

Three Points Center now under conditional licensing

The center was put on a conditional license per state of Utah regulations by the Department of Health and Human Services on July 27 for several violations, including violations of clients' rights.

Fourteen violations are listed within the official conditional licensing document. Each violation cites the part of the regulations and Utah law in which the infraction occurred.

It was confirmed all violations were self-reported by the Three Points Center. The majority of the violations were from stopping the students from leaving the property.

“We dispute some of them,” Thibault said. “It was because we were stopping kids ... leaving their dorms at night, and so we got a violation for that. They go out windows and go out doors. We cannot predict what they are going to do. Our goal is to keep them safe.”

The incidents that resulted in violations were handled by investigation, with disciplinary action performed by the administration of the treatment center.

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