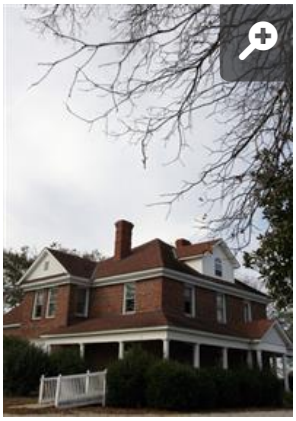
LOCAL NEWS

School of Troubles: Another chance for abandoned boarding school



The administration building of the former Carolina Springs Academy is one of the many buildings on the site's campus that will be used in the operation of the new Magnolia Christian School.

By Kirk Brown of the Independent Mail
Posted: ***Dec. 10, 2010***

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Troubled teens from across the United States are expected to arrive soon at a boarding school in Abbeville County that state regulators sought to close last year.

The former Carolina Springs Academy will open in early 2011 as Magnolia Christian School.

"We're not backing away from our mission," owner Narvin Lichfield said.

Lichfield said classifying Magnolia as a Christian boarding school will exempt it from the licensing and staffing rules that created years of problems for him after Carolina Springs opened more than a decade ago.

In April 2009 the South Carolina Department of Social Services revoked Carolina Springs Academy's license. The agency said its decision was based on numerous violations found during 19 unannounced visits over 18 months.

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seeing staff members cursing at and degrading boys enrolled in the boarding school.

Lichfield said there were no handcuffs or Tasers at Carolina Springs.

"It's a fairy tale," Lichfield said, adding that no abuse claims have ever been substantiated at his school.

Since a majority of the teens sent to Carolina Springs had behavior problems, Lichfield said, strict discipline was a necessity. He also said some students were restrained when they acted out.

"These are kids who have beaten up their parents," Lichfield said. "These are kids who are out of control."

A spider's nest and staffing ratios

DSS officials accused Carolina Springs of failing to maintain a clean and safe environment for students whose parents paid up to $3,000 per month in tuition.

Besides moldy and outdated food, inspectors saw flies and a large black widow spider's nest in the dining hall kitchen. DSS officials said there was poor plumbing and the boys' dormitory lacked adequate heating. Carolina Springs had a history of fire code violations and DSS officials said the school didn't conduct fire drills, even after a building burned in June 2008.

Lichfield said he didn't mind eating meals at Carolina Springs. He blamed vandalism by unruly students for most of the plumbing problems.

Carolina Springs also was cited for repeatedly failing to comply with state-mandated staffing levels of one employee per 10 students during the day and one employee per 14 students at night.

When three boys ran away on a rainy night in November 2008, a single

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Here is a glance at the history of Carolina Springs Academy for unruly youths and it's planned reopening as a Christian school.

1998

- Narvin Lichfield moves from Utah to Abbeville County to open Carolina Springs Academy.
- Two state agencies contend that Carolina Springs is an unlicensed residential treatment center.

1999

- The South Carolina Department of Social Services licenses Carolina Springs as a child-caring institution for 58 students.

2001

- Lichfield opens Academy at Dundee Ranch in Costa Rica.

2003

- Costa Rican officials raid Academy at Dundee Ranch, sparking a student riot. Lichfield is briefly jailed on charges of coercion, holding minors against their will and crimes of an international character. As a result of those charges, South Carolina officials bar him from the Carolina Springs campus.

2004

- The permitted capacity at Carolina Springs is raised to 162 students after a new dormitory is built.

2007

- Lichfield is acquitted of all charges in Costa Rica.

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2009

- Citing numerous violations, the Department of Social Services revokes Carolina Springs Academy's operating license.
- Lichfield closes Carolina Springs. It then reopens as a Christian boarding school for girls.

2010

- The girls' school closes.
- Lichfield announces plans to open Magnolia Christian School in early 2011. He says the school will be exempt from state licensing and staffing rules.

Lichfield called the state's staffing requirements unreasonable for a boarding school.

"It put us out of business," he said.

After initially appealing the revocation of its license, Carolina Springs closed in September 2009. It then reopened as a Christian boarding school for girls, which shut down in June.

Magnolia Christian School will enroll coed students. The monthly tuition has been reduced to $2,495.

"We have plenty of demand for our services," Lichfield said.

After learning about Lichfield's plans to reopen the school, DSS officials visited its campus Friday. They said they were seeking information from Elaine Davis, the former director at Carolina Springs who also will be in charge of Magnolia Christian School.

In the beginning: church, court and evening visits

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The boarding school features dormitories, a dining hall and barn on 450 acres of pastures and woods on Green Acres Lane near Due West.

Lichfield marketed Carolina Springs as an educationally accredited specialty boarding school where defiant teens would be taught "respect, honor and integrity in the Old South traditions."

Two South Carolina state agencies were at odds with Lichfield soon after Carolina Springs opened. The Department of Health and Environmental Control and DSS each contended that Carolina Springs was an unlicensed residential treatment center.

Lichfield said state officials harassed him because he was a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"Rumors were going around about how the Mormons are coming to South Carolina," said Lichfield, who stressed that the church was not involved with Carolina Springs. "There was a firestorm of religious prejudice."

With the licensing dispute simmering in court, Lichfield hired Davis to replace the school's first director. Female students had complained to investigators about comments her predecessor made regarding a girl's breasts and how often he stopped by their rooms at night, DHEC records show.

DSS eventually licensed Carolina Springs as a child-caring institution for 58 students in September 1999. Its permitted capacity was raised to 162 students after a new dormitory was built in 2004.

Points and privileges

To deal with violence-prone youths who were addicted to drugs or engaging in illicit sex, Carolina Springs used a six-level behavior modification program. Lichfield said his oldest brother, Robert, had fine-

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Students entered the program at the lowest level. They earned points for good behavior, which enabled them to gain privileges as they moved to higher levels. Bad behavior carried the consequence of point deductions. Those who committed serious infractions were taken to an area called Observation Placement.

"A lot of kids done real good ? it was all up to the student," Davis said.

Many parents praised Carolina Springs for righting their wayward children.

"After a few weeks there, I had my daughter back," proclaimed one father who is an Anderson native.

Former Carolina Springs Academy student Philip DiPaolo was 16 years old when he offered a less glowing assessment of the school in an affidavit.

"Carolina Springs felt like an institution instead of a school or program to help kids," said DiPaolo, who now serves in the U.S. Marine Corps. His grandmother said DiPaolo was sent to the boarding school from Florida after taking money from her and his grandfather.

DiPaolo described the Observation Placement area as a "skinny building next to the boys' dorm and near the basketball hoop."

"I heard girls screaming out at the OP room all the time," DiPaolo said in his affidavit.

Staff members frequently threatened to send students to a tougher boarding school in Jamaica, DiPaolo said.

"Staff told us that Carolina Springs was like a 5-star hotel compared to Jamaica," he said.

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"It was the happiest moment of my time there."

Charged then cleared in Costa Rica

With Carolina Springs filled to capacity by 2001, Lichfield opened a boarding school in Costa Rica called Academy at Dundee Ranch.

Several months after quitting her job, the academy's former director told Costa Rican officials in March 2003 that she was concerned about the well-being of Dundee Ranch students.

Authorities raided Academy at Dundee Ranch a few weeks later and notified 210 students that they were free to go. Dozens of the youths celebrated their liberation by ransacking the school.

Lichfield was briefly jailed on charges of coercion, holding minors against their will and crimes of an international character. As a result of those charges, South Carolina officials barred him from the Carolina Springs campus. He was acquitted of all the charges in 2007.

"I went to jail over nothing," said Lichfield. "I spent four years going through the joke of the judicial system in Costa Rica."

Lichfield blamed a student's mother who was embroiled in a custody dispute, an overzealous child advocate, disgruntled employees and an opportunistic constable for orchestrating the Dundee Ranch raid.

"Our staff was taken out at gunpoint," he said. "This was South America at its worst."

Dorm fire, other woes

Carolina Springs, which had managed to stay under the media radar, was thrust into the headlines by a fire on June 25, 2008. No one was hurt, but the midday blaze destroyed a dormitory that housed 57 boys.

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after he hurt his wrist playing basketball.

Upon learning about the case, Lexington Insurance Company successfully sued Carolina Springs in federal court to rescind its $1 million liability policy. The insurer said school officials had made "false or intentionally evasive and incomplete" representations about violations, physical and sexual abuse and other incidents that could lead to claims.

More recently, another former student won a $200,000 judgment against Carolina Springs. The girl fractured her arm after falling off a horse at the boarding school in 2008.

Besides mounting legal woes, Lichfield said, his oldest brother raised his consulting fees for the school just as the economic downturn began to affect enrollment. DSS officials also were ratcheting up the pressure about staffing levels after a report that six boys at the school had tattooed themselves.

"It's been a nightmare," Lichfield said during a recent interview. "All we have tried to do is help kids and we've been crucified."

"I know I have a bit of a persecution complex," he added. "But after everybody starts shooting at you, you learn to duck your head."

A new business plan

Lichfield said he spent close to $3 million covering losses at Carolina Springs. He said he was ready to make a change by September 2009. To avoid continued scrutiny from DSS, Lichfield closed Carolina Springs and converted it into a Christian boarding school for girls.

But that endeavor was doomed, Lichfield said, by the bad economy, overhead expenses and an employee who embezzled $200,000.

Lichfield said he closed the girls' school in June so he could sever

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children."

"We're here because we believe in what we do," he said.

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