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Abuse Investigation & Protective Services Report - Death of SB - (OR , SageWalk)

THURSDAY, MAY 05 2011 | KATHRYN WHITEHEAD

Detailed report on the investigation of Sergey Blashchishen's tragic and senseless death at Aspen Education Group's (AEG) SageWalk wilderness program.



Download here: Abuse Investigation & Protective Services Report - March 17, 2011
Vidie here:

Lyudmila Blashchishen speaks to her sons death, not understanding how a reputable place like SageWalk, whose executive director confirms to have been providing "wilderness therapy", could have failed to prevent her sons slow death as he succumbed to hyperthermia.

Online memorial for Sergey, established by those who loved him.

Substantiated accounts include:

1) Staff members (identified as AP1 and AP 3) neglecting the care of Sergey by failing to provide medical care, which was likely to endanger his health or welfare. SUBSTANTIATED

2) SageWalk neglecting the care of Sergey by failing to provide medical care, which was likely to endanger his health or welfare. SUBSTANTIATED

3) CONCLUSION: Based on the totality of the evidence, the investigators concluded that there was reasonable cause to believe that SageWalk neglected the care of Sergey. End result.... Death.

Required Actions: None because SageWalk is closed.

None? A child is dead and **nobody** will be held accountable? Sure, SageWalk may be closed, but what about the individual staff member or AEG? Why is justice for Sergey not being sought?

This report details Sergey's final hours, an almost absurd account of blatant negligence by a program that taught staff to see the youth in their care, not as people deserving of concern, respect and dignity, but as delinquent youth, effectively dehumanizing them for maximum program impact. The assumption made by SageWalk is clear: the youth clearly lacked the mental capacity to know what was best for them, therefore their thoughts and feelings about being there were irrelevant - they knew what was best for Sergey, more than Sergey knew for himself. And the program, the staff, acted accordingly every step of the way.

Volunteer

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This shocking incident is strikingly similar to what happened to 14-year-old Matthew Meyer, who died at the hands of negligent staff of an easily preventable heat induced stroke. The camp, called Lone Star Expeditions, is now closed, but was previously owned by the Aspen Education Group.

The justification for neglect? Perhaps the belief that harsh treatment would serve as a wake up call to youth, which is so egregious it warrants something far short of respect and compassion. Yes, that sounds familiar, we know the drill, tough love, etc. I wonder how that rationale works when a child actually wants help and knows he needs helps, as was the case with Sergey. Even with such desire in place, the ridiculous assumption remains - these kids are trying to resist the program, game the system... they can't be reached without being forced into submission. And yet, what sane individual wouldn't resist degrading treatment? Well, for one, it's not treatment, in the clinical sense. (More on that later.) But the assumption alone inevitably sets up a standard, a dynamic of cat and mouse that will inevitably play out. (Who, except for the troubled teen industry, is unfamiliar with the important lessons learned from the infamous Stanford Experiment?)

Moreover, the risk of these assumptions, beyond being utterly unhelpful, if not harmful, and likely traumatic to most who are subjected to it, is exemplified in this case and in countless other casualties of this industry of violence (See definition 3). From the get go, as the report notes, the staff mistook the signs Sergey was becoming hyperthermic for 'manipulation'. Any program placing safety second to the need to dominate, ensuring submission over medical needs, is one that approaches the task of 'helping' youth in a manner so contrary to the notion of help (providing strength and aid) it is Incomprehensible that such programs remain in existence during this day and age. For more on programs that 'help,' click here and read about another Aspen gem, a therapeutic boarding school called Mount Bachelor Academy, that used sleep deprivation and verbally abusive attacks to induce submission over the mental health and wellbeing of its students - lap dances as therapy anyone?

But let us not get confused in the language. Don't misinterpret the term 'therapeutic' to believe the place actually provides a therapeutic services based in legitimacy. No, no, no – the therapeutic boarding school and wilderness camp, despite marketing language that may suggest otherwise, are programs that, under law, are defined as providing a service. Like a chef who cooks your food and a waitress who brings it to you, staff make your kid hike and maybe do some group therapy and then present them to you, shell shocked but happy to be home, as a service rendered. Oh, semantics...

While in Oregon, neither wilderness camp programs nor their longer term cousin, the therapeutic boarding school, may accept youth that require residential treatment, I can't help but find a few things about the confusion regarding what these programs actually do very troubling. It appears as though the legal obligation that limits the scope of care and responsibly to a service is cloaked in language and acts a lot like someone selling and claiming to provide "treatment." (88% success rate doing what, exactly?)

SageWalk, like most other Aspen programs, make the claim that their program induces change in youth struggling with just about any mental health issue imaginable. If what they are selling is not "treatment" for a condition, then what is the standard being applied that says kids being forced to hike along side program staff (who are almost never qualified mental health professionals), in an environment where they are made to feel utterly powerless is an appropriate way of addressing manifestations of the serious mental health issues Aspen claims to be equipped to address - including Depression, Anxiety, ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, etc. (See here for a list of issues SUWS's, another AEG wilderness program, claims are ~~treatable~~ serviceable within their program).

Other youth, with no prior diagnosis but exhibiting behavioral signs that might suggest a mental health issue, are also "serviceable" because there is no requirement under Oregon law requiring a mental health assessment prior to admission into these programs. In this kind of environment, their condition will likely remain unknown and not treated properly. How, then, do these programs know what is an appropriate intervention based on the child's issues?

Apparently, all said and done, it really does not matter. At the end of the day these kids are seen a defiant kids – not kids with specific medical conditions that require very specific kinds of treatment. In the world of wilderness camps, staff may not know a single thing about the proper course of treatment for a person with a disability, but they are trained to do a few things that pretty much sums up much the course of care and the camp experience – forced compliance and behaviour modification. In reality, no legitimate treatment is necessary when the individualized service plan contains a list of goals for change and the service provided by staff is to help the child meet those goals by way of manipulation and coercion.

The inevitable end result ? A twisted, unaccountable program in culture, if not policy, but likely in both. A

- Oregon settles case with school (OR, Mount Bachelor Academy)
- Settlement Agreement - Mount Bachelor Academy, Aspen Educaiton Group and DHS (Oregon)
- Aspen shuts down five programs!
- Oregon "Tough Love" School Sued For Child Abuse: Nine Students File $14 Million Suit - July 6, 2011

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place where basic, legitimate questions about information that staff deliberately withholds from students, such as "how long will the hike be to next camp?" or "when can I talk to my mom?" or "when can I go home?" are considered to be an act of non-compliance within the program.

Should a kid indicate that the presence of feelings of utter powerlessness is having, in stark contrast to the program mantra, a detrimental impact on his mental health, what would the likely response be?

Likely outcome: Well, it's not unlikely that such a brave soul would be met with a response like, "that's your old self resisting change" or "you have the power to get out of here, just change" or "these feelings aren't progress, once you've gone through the program you'll see". (Click here to hear from Paul Lewis about what happened to his 12 year old son, Ryan Lewis, when he made such indication regarding his mental health while placed at Alldredge Academy, a formerly operating wilderness camp run by L.J. Mitchell who now runs Greenbrier Academy).

So, in short, it's hit or miss. The only parental reassurance I can offer is that, your child **might** be cared of if he's full on suicidal and is believed. In which case, he might be appropriately placed in a psychiatric hospital where he would be permitted basic rights to contact his parent, to access a child abuse hot-line, etc, However, if the program culture or policy is anything like Alldredge Academy (i.e grossly inappropriate policies created by an attorney who should probably not be running a school for youth with disabilities), your child may be ignored and allowed to carry out his final, desperate wishes.

Otherwise, stating that the program is "not working" or "doesn't feel appropriate" is not an option. It is a symptom. Again, the philosophy dictates all. And if you are not changing you, not the program, is at fault. Now that's some service,alright!

Should you be a child in placement and decide that you are near breaking point and that is having a detrimental impact, you're really have only three options. You may either:
1) share your predicament with staff or,
2) 'break down' and pretend it's a 'break through',
3) or try to runaway.

I'll go out on a limb here (not really) to say that, after the brutality of the first few days, trusting enough to confide in staff regarding a deeply personal concern such as mental health, where other normal questions have been looked at through a lens of suspicion and where the statement could be seen as a means to escape, it seems unlikely a youth will share this information. Furthermore, it is ever more unlikely that staff would encourage, invite or, dare I say, respect expression of such valid concerns. It's a sad day when running away is the only way for a child's concerns to be heard, but it is not a unique reality.

With regards to "breaking down," please note that the child may eventually re-frame the break as a real and legitimate breakthrough, where he or she finally understands all that must be done and all they that have done wrong, etc. Generally, this break is one of desperation and guilt. Moving forward, the child will do all that must be done to get home. Generally, along with this break in spirit comes the belief that they must surrender to the program, ignoring their own concerns or the fact that nothing close to legitimate "treatment" is being provided, if they want to see freedom again.

Wilderness camps really ought to note certain unwelcome side effects of their "service": Until they are old enough to recognize that a breakdown is counterproductive and that conditions for growth do not include conditions of deprivation and absence of free will, there's not much that can be done. Some may call it their – "A-ha" moment. The "A-ha, oh my gosh, all these years I believed in what was sold to me as pseudo-therapy and I blamed myself when in reality that program taught me little more than how to distrust not only others, but myself". This is especially true of youth placed in therapeutic boarding schools, where they endure years of systemic break downs (or "breakthroughs").

What if the child should question the legality of the process leading up to placement or the placement itself?
In cases where professional kidnappers (euphemistically called escorts) come in the middle of the night, handcuff the child, and take them to a program under the threat of force, where the youth is often blindfolded en route, and kept indefinitely, the response is likely to be: "Ha! Legal? Rights? bah! You have no legal rights." Actually, Oregon provides for a few, some of which can waived by parents. But the biggest issue is: what's the point of having rights when you can't access someone who has the authority to enforce it or to whom you can contact to investigate violations?

The staff in many programs do not see the youth placed in their care as being in need of support, positivity, and empowerment. These youth are instead treated punitively, forced to prove their

commitment to change by being forced to live under conditions that would break any human's - child or adult - spirit. They don't recognize that perhaps a child who would rather be home is not being resistant to change, but that perhaps the oppressive coercive conditions of disempowerment might not feel like a service that is respectful of his needs and boundaries?

One can easily see how most people might rightly respond with concern for their own self-preservation. "But, CAFETY," you might say, "how can you explain away the outcome claims AEG makes to suggest forced hiking and fear works?" Well, the SUWS website boasts that surveys sent out to families show an 88% success rate. 88%! Awesome! For all of the ailments listed? Wow!

Why isn't this trend catching on with adults when, by all accounts, this treatment is the cure all for every behavioral problem associated with mental illness, as well as almost every other kind of problems. Surely this would translate to adult care quite well. Oh… right… adults have rights! They can't be prohibited from leaving a wilderness camp and can't be forced to submit unquestioningly to domineering staff for an indefinite period of time, in conditions designed to elicit feelings of utter helplessness, and do away with any sense of agency. Hm, I wonder if it's at all possible that such conditions might skew that 88% figure? How many children would want to admit to a program they are still doing and feeling the things that landed them there? Even if the survey was anonymous, I suspect it's quite possible that the fear would make honesty quite difficult… and that, in some cases, the shame the program instilled could also yield less than forthcoming results. Ever done something that was so awful – so so awful that you were abandoned to the middle of nowhere by your parents, left to hike your problems away in grueling conditions – and find that admitting to yourself, a year later, that you are doing that thing again, even after all the hardship you went through to 'change' was just not possible?

When considering their own care - most parents value informed consent. But where a child is concerned, it's unclear, given how many kids are sent away, if parents expect such standards be considered. Even if a parent wants to perform their due diligence – where do they begin? When a parent is seeking help for their struggling child, fearing for their life, they are not looking for "services" they are looking for treatment. There's no way for a parent to know that. At therapeutic boarding schools and wilderness camps, there exists no standard of care because there is no treatment being provided (in Oregon, at least). The experimental elements rule the day, and so here we have it: The Wilderness Program.

The congressional hearings in 2007 detailed the gruesome death of Aaron Bacon, (click here to see list other lives cut short) is all to reminiscent of this SageWalk death, where staff's training and judgment conclude clear signs of illness as typical acts of defiance. The staff, in this case, use words meant to coerce, designed to humiliate and undermine their dignity, breaking them down so the group can move forward. The staff, as is commonplace in most wilderness camps, were oblivious to Sergey's needs, they only measure outcome in results of a service provided. They see him as a kid they were hired to set straight. They are hired to push, until the youth would bend, and finally... success! Their spirit breaks and they do only as they are told, they repeat what they are told to say and believe, for the sake of their own sanity, that they have undergone a process of recovery and transformation.

Those kids are the luck ones. Sergey and his family, however, are not so lucky. SageWalk didn't have enough time to break Sergey's spirit, but they pushed him beyond what his body could handle, given it's condition. They robbed of him his soul. The staff told Sergey, as he was slowly dying, stumbling and mumbling incoherently in Russian, "You're making us wait, the other kids are smaller than you." Those are on of the final, unsympathetic words Sergey heard as he collapsed. So this is what "service" to those with disabilities and other challenges looks like?

Sergey, after being kidnapped and blindfolded, then led of to the camp, he had explained he actually wanted change, he knew his limitation would eventually lead to someplace negative, perhaps even death. I fully believe that Sergey did not want to be unhappy. I believe that he did not want to feel so powerless, so lacking in skills to communicate his feelings, that he felt aggression was the only way to set boundaries and fell heard. Who would want *that??* Sergey's mother, Lyudmila Blashchishen, placed her trust in the SageWalk. But how could they know that this program was only selling its own brand of manipulation and aggression? This place was not a place to learn how to learn that the art of communicate and be heard. For that he would, at minimum, need to be exposed to staff who model such skills and help him distinguish between appropriate communication. Optimally, Sergey wouldn't have to be exposed to the stigma and shame of being segregated and institutionalized (albeit, an outdoor institution). And, instead, he would be surrounded by love, support, respect, legitimate therapy, and hopefully, close parental involvement. But instead, what was mirrored back to him by these strangers who new what was best was not a communication style that demonstrated shared mutual respect and appropriate boundaries. It wouldn't be a wilderness program if that were that case, after all.

Instead, from the moment Sergey was woken up in the middle of the night and ~~kidnapped~~ escorted, blindfolded, until the moment blood flowed from his lips as his life slowly slipped away, Sergey was surrounded by precisely the kind of people and system that operate from a place of total disregard for the feelings of the youth they are determined to change, even if that means selling to parents a series of behavior (or service plans) that is rooted in same the kind of belief system and way of communicating that lands most kid placement.

This program could not possibly teach self-love and respect when the fundamental philosophy was flawed. The assumption that kids can only change by force and when they do not do as they're told, they are simply being defiant has real life consequences. When sickness presents itself? Not possible. Homesick? Depressed? Feeling hopeless? Who cares, this is for the best. Feeling like this is not helping? That's because you're being resistant, once you let your wall down and accept our one-size-fits-all hike until you break (or die mode), no matter the issue, dilemma or crisis, there's an 88% chance we will change you (according to SUWS's survey). Ironically, that's what SageWalk did, and it changed Sergey and his family's life forever.

Next >

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