The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20080906231417/http://www.wwaspsinfo.net/dundee…

A Mandeville woman, with some strong-arm help, frees her sons from a Costa Rican school. Their father who placed them in the boot-camp-like facility may accuse her of kidnapping.

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OROTINA, COSTA RICA -- For tourists, this piedmont town near the Pacific is just a gas or soda stopover en route to some glorious tropical beach. But then, the teenagers at the Academy at Dundee Ranch aren't tourists.

Just what they are is subject to interpretation. Some consider them students, albeit of an unruly, sometimes self-destructive sort, sent here by desperate parents to turn their lives around. Others, Carey Bock of Mandeville among them, subscribe to the view that Academy Dundee is more like a prison and that the teens are inmates.

That conviction last week launched Bock, a 45-year-old assistant vice president at Resource Bank in Mandeville, on a three-day, $15,000 odyssey.

She flew to Costa Rica, equipped herself with an entourage of burly men and drove out to the academy's remote cluster of buildings on an unpaved road northwest of Orotina.

Without prior announcement, she barged onto the campus and left with her 16-year-old twin sons.

Hours later, after the U.S. Embassy in San José refused to issue the boys new passports to replace the ones held by the academy, she talked her way onto a flight to Houston and on Wednesday night shepherded the boys back home by way of Louis Armstrong International Airport.

Bock and the twins, Geoffrey and Garred, now face court action threatened by her ex-husband, Mike Bock, the boys' father, who shipped them off to Academy Dundee in March. He remains convinced, they say, that Dundee's tough-as-nails approach is what the boys need.

Carey Bock says she will do whatever it takes to keep them from having to go back.

"I'm not pretending my sons are angels, but I think they're better off in the United States," she said. "It doesn't make any sense to me to put your kids at risk because you think that will save their lives."

Searching for solutions

A year ago, the twins were enrolled at Mandeville High School when their mother, exasperated by their drinking and their cavalier attitude toward curfews and other parental safeguards, sent them to live with their father, stationed in Rio de Janeiro as the country manager for Weatherford Completion Systems, an oil supply company. The couple's joint custody of Geoffrey and Garred remained legally intact.

What transpired in Brazil remains unclear. The twins wouldn't discuss the topic, and Mike Bock did not return phone calls or e-mail messages. But when the twins returned to Mandeville for a visit last Christmas, their mother concluded that the situation had not improved, and, in an attempt to dodge their flight back to Rio, the boys ran away briefly.

Soon thereafter, Bock said, her ex-husband told her he had found a "school in the States" for the twins, but he remained evasive about the institution and it was only through the estranged couple's daughter that Mrs. Bock learned Mike and the boys had flown to Costa Rica.

At the San Jose airport on March 28, according to the twins, their father handed them over to an Academy Dundee representative who drove the youths over the coffee-terraced mountains to the school in the torrid coastal plain.

'Youth specialty schools'

The site outside Orotina is one of three foreign and eight U.S.-based sites that make up the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP), which is headquartered in Utah. Dubbing themselves "the world's largest and finest youth specialty schools," the WWASP academies are part of a so-called boot-camp or tough-love movement, places for the conversion or rehabilitation of teenagers, most of whom are caught in a cycle of drug and alcohol abuse. The teenagers are enrolled there by their parents, not referred by courts.

As the growing number of such institutions attests, most parents are apparently pleased with the results. The U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica said it has been asked only twice to check up on resident students since the school opened a year ago, and one of those requests came from Carey Bock. The parents of another New Orleans-area teenager attending Dundee had nothing negative to say about the school. In total, three students from southeast Louisiana -- two from the New Orleans area and one from Baton Rouge -- remain at Academy Dundee.

But the movement as a whole, and WWASP academies in particular, are not without critics.

Last year, a 14-year-old at a tough-love camp near Phoenix died after being forced to eat mud and stand in 116-degree heat, according to authorities who in February charged the camp's director with second-degree murder.

That site was not associated with the WWASP, but a female student at the WWASP's Tranquility Bay site in Jamaica committed suicide last year.

In 1998, authorities in the Czech Republic closed Morava Academy, a WWASP school, after allegations of abuse and illegal imprisonment of 57 teenagers.

The couple running the Czech school, Glenda and Steven Roach, had moved to Europe after being accused of similar crimes at a school in Mexico.

Their whereabouts are unknown, and WWASP president Ken Kay said the Roaches no longer work for the organization.

Physical ordeals

Garred and Geoffrey Bock said they were not subjected to beatings at Academy Dundee, though they claimed other students were. But some of the punishments they described were physical ordeals by any account. For talking when they weren't supposed to, as one example, the twins said they were ordered into an isolated room and forced to kneel silently for 12 hours a day, three days in a row.

WWASP makes no secret of the harshness of its program. While literature provided to parents says the school "is not a treatment facility, counseling-based program, or a correctional institution," it acknowledges that freedoms are sharply curtailed. In Costa Rica, the pamphlets tell parents, "the food isn't as good as the 'home-cooked' meals you have provided them, the accommodations are simple and basic, not nearly as nice as your home."

"In a nutshell, our purpose is creating family unity through growth, and there is a degree of controversy that goes with that," Kay said, without commenting specifically on the Bock boys. WWASP does not own Academy Dundee and is not a hands-on partner in what goes on there, he said. "We don't get involved in the day-to-day decisions or personnel decisions," he said. Academy Dundee's director, Joe Atkin, referred inquiries to Kay's office.

Spartan, but expensive

Upon arrival, newcomers sleep in what is known as "the bat cave " -- in reality a hallway full of cots, unprotected by mosquito netting, the Bock twins said, despite the serious outbreak of dengue fever that has beset Costa Rica's Pacific coast this year.

Dundee students pursue an independent study program in a variety of courses. The school literature notes, however, that, "the teachers/tutors working with the students do not need or may not necessarily have U.S. credentials or equivalent."

Despite the Spartan conditions and the uncertain attainments of the staff, the cost is not cheap. In fact, a year at a WWASP program costs about the same as a year at a private university in the United States. For the twins, that came to roughly $2,000 each per month, and that does not include $95 a month for incidental fees, a $2,000 one-time processing fee, plus $295 for uniform service and other costs.

Teenagers begin at Level 1, and may have no telephone contact with their parents until they reach Level 3, a process that can take anywhere from "60 to 120 days or more," according to Academy Dundee materials provided to parents. After that, telephone calls are permitted once a month, but only "at times prearranged between parents and their family representative at the school," the materials state.

The twins said no music is allowed until a teen reaches Level 4, at which time parental visits also are permitted. But status can be fleeting at Academy Dundee. For example, the twins said that after six months they were on the verge of Level 4 status, but that another student at the facility remained mired at Level 1 after five years in WWASP programs.

Some want out

Not surprisingly, given the bad habits that may have landed them at Dundee and the harsh discipline upon arrival, some students try to bolt. Since March, six have fled Academy Dundee in three separate incidents, according to the Bock boys. The runaways are trying to make it to the U.S. Embassy in San José, a distance of 35 miles as the crow flies, but by foot an arduous trek over steep mountains and through rain forests teeming with snakes, crocodiles and other menaces. The twins said most runaways get lost in the jungle where the mud is so thick it sucks off their shoes. Barefoot, they press on but are usually found within 24 hours and carried back to the school, their feet lacerated and swollen from the ordeal.

Indeed, runaways were the lead topic in the Academy's newsletter, Dundeeism, in September.

"Running away doesn't pay," Atkin wrote. "You all know that great song that says, 'You can sign out any time you want, but you can never leave.' "

In another newsletter item, a woman named Breanne Berrett strikes a more sinister tone. "If you were found, well, have fun at Tranquility Bay or Boot Camp," she warns would-be runaways. "The wonderful facilitators will be waiting there to greet you."

Bodyguards help

No one was waiting for Carey Bock when she drove onto the campus Tuesday. She had set off from San José that morning with Steve Bozak, who described himself as an education consultant, from Albany, N.Y., two hulking men named John and Ty, recruited by Bozak from California, her fiancé, Ken Levine.

In the troubled-teen business, the bodyguards are known as an escort service, and they cut both ways. At times, after parents have signed off on the procedure, they burst into homes in the early morning hours and yank teenagers out of their beds, whisking them off to the boot camps in which their parents have enrolled them. In this case, though, they were on hand to assist Bock in taking her sons away.

The school was ungated, and upon arrival Bock encountered about 40 people milling about a circular driveway. On one side, a handful of boys were washing a car and, in front of the main office, about 10 girls were pushing brooms in the hot sun.

Bock, her voice tremulous with fear and anger, asked to speak with Atkin, who appeared clearly startled by the intruders. When Bock asked to see her boys, Atkin said it was his understanding that a St. Tammany judge had to issue an order allowing her to visit her sons.

"No," Bock said, trembling. "I want to see my boys."

Atkin assured her they would be brought to the office, and the bodyguards tried in vain to calm Bock.

Outside, the girls pushing the brooms asked repeatedly for water. "Si, un poco water," a counselor replied in an odd mix of Spanish and English, but no water was distributed. One of the sweepers crouched with a hacking cough, and another, her face and arms flushed, came unglued. Shaking and sobbing, she moved toward the shade.

"She's from Canada and kind of freaking out because she just got a call that one of her neighbors back home is dying of skin cancer," Atkin explained.

He and another Dundee staffer said they wanted to call the St. Tammany courts, and one of the bodyguards said that was fine.

"You make whatever calls you have to make," he said calmly, "and in the meantime let's just bring the boys out here so she can see them."

'Lucky bastard!'

Perhaps 10 minutes later, the twins -- sporting Marine buzz cuts, khaki pants, long-sleeved white shirts and ties, and flip-flops -- came walking up. Their "family representative," Peter, had an arm around each shoulder. They looked completely mystified until they saw their mother, and then they rushed forward. The trio embraced as the twins started crying.

After the brief reunion, one of the bodyguards urged Bock to walk with the boys toward the car.

As they walked swiftly away, holding hands, one of the boys washing the car on the other side of the driveway yelled out, "We love you, Garred!" adding, as the mother and her sons approached the car, "you lucky bastard!"

Without a word, Bock, Levine and the twins hopped into the car and drove off the campus, the bodyguards following on foot. The twins were scared and mystified. "Have you got passports? Are you going to get in trouble, Mom? This is weird, this is really weird," they muttered.

On the two-hour drive back to San José, the twins offered a mixed analysis of the program.

"I know people are going to want me to say it's 100 percent evil, but I'm not going to do that," Garred said. "I learned a lot of good things, too." The twins described an "inside program" and an "outside program." The inside component involves two- to -three-day seminars, which WWASP calls teen discovery, teen focus or teen accountability. They are run every few weeks, and the twins spoke highly of them. In between, however, the twins said the school was more like a boot camp, with merits and demerits handed out willy-nilly by both students and counselors. There are about 150 students, they said, "and only one bathroom works."

Mounting concerns

"This whole thing has just been a blur," Carey Bock said when they arrived back at their hotel.

In truth, Bock's blur was almost seven months old. She said her husband had refused to tell her where he had enrolled the boys, and when she learned the name of the school and the country from their daughter, she still had no idea how to contact her sons.

Bock, increasingly distraught, became positively horrified after watching a Montel Williams show concerning the boy who died at the Arizona boot camp.

She began cruising the Internet and soon found a web of parents who oppose WWASP.

She called the academy but was told she could not speak to the twins. Her concern mounting, she sent an e-mail message to Atkin, asking him about his credentials and the credentials of the school and other faculty members.

"I worded it very carefully as a concerned parent and not in some confrontational way, asking the same kind of questions I think any parent would ask about a boarding school where their children were," she said.

"But he just e-mailed me back saying he didn't have time to answer those questions."

Telling it to the judge

The Academy at Dundee Ranch Parent Checklist says that, in cases of divorce, custody must be verified prior to arrival. If both biological parents are signing, no custody verification is necessary. Carey Bock never signed, and, given the joint custody status of her divorce agreement with Mike Bock, she instituted a case against him.

In August, Mike Bock flew to Covington and a hearing was held before Judge Peter Garcia. Carey Bock said she was called into a lengthy conference in the judge's chambers, and that Garcia said to her, "I've got your sons on the phone right here. Do you want to talk to them?" It was the first time they'd spoken together since last year.

"I get on the phone and they're crying, saying my letters to them were getting them in trouble and talking about having to stare at the wall for 12 hours, and kneeling for three days in a row because they wore their shoes," she said.

Bock then asked the U.S. Embassy to perform a welfare check. Consular officer James Russo visited the school in August and spoke with the boys, and Bock said he later told her, cryptically, "it's not as

bad as some of them."

'We're going to the airport'

The embassy declined to grant The Times-Picayune an interview with Russo, but he saw the twins again Wednesday. That morning, Carey Bock, Levine and the boys went to the embassy to try to obtain new passports for the twins, because their current ones are apparently in the possession of Academy Dundee.

Russo was ready for them, they said. He had been faxed the joint custody papers the day before, either by Mike Bock in Brazil or his attorney in St. Tammany, and said he could not issue new passports without the signature of both parents. According to Carey Bock, the twins and Levine, Russo asked the twins if they had been physically abused, and they said no. He then asked them if they wanted to go home, and they said yes.

Empty-handed, the foursome returned to their hotel. Bock was crying as the family huddled in their room to plot their next step. Bock's return flight reservations were for Thursday. Minutes later, they strode into the lobby with bags packed.

"We're going to the airport," Bock said.

At the airport, Bock, who had the twins' birth certificates, Social Security cards, and a passport one of the twins had lost in Mandeville last year, spoke with the airline, got the boarding passes and left for the United States.

The next phase may unfold in the courts. After arriving home, Bock said her attorney told her Mike Bock may file kidnapping charges against her. But she says she is prepared to fight.

"I have to wonder about the majority of individuals who support WWASP," she said. "I say that only because it is hard for me to imagine a parent would sign over their rights as parents, and basically that is what they have done."

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