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Dundee Owner Released from Jail, Closes Teen Facility

Tico Times (Costa Rica)

By Tim Rogers

Narvin Lichfield, owner of the embattled behavior modification program Dundee Ranch Academy, told The Tico Times during an interview Saturday that he was closing the controversial teen facility indefinitely, and that all but "30 or 40" of the 200 students have already left.

"We are closing the facility until we have a legal definition from the government about what we can and can't do," said Lichfield, shortly after being released from jail. "Most of the students have already left and the rest are leaving Sunday."

The Child Welfare Office (PANI) and representatives of the U.S. government are reportedly monitoring the exodus.

Lichfield was released from jail Friday around midnight after being held for 24 hours on allegations of detaining children against their will, coercion and human rights violations (TT Daily Page, May 23).

Prosecutor Fernando Vargas had requested the judge give Lichfield a six-month preventive prison sentence, but the academy owner was let out on the conditions he not go near Dundee Ranch until all the students have left the country. Lichfield and his Costa Rican wife are also prohibited from leaving the country for the next six months, while investigators continue their probe of the WorldWide Association of Specialty Program's (WWASP) now-defunct correctional facility.

Lichfield denied allegations that he had been shipping students to WWASPS notoriously tough facility in Jamaica. However, according to parents, several dozen Dundee students have already arrived at the Jamaica camp.

Vargas said that he has received one formal complaint against Dundee from a former student, who testified to physical and emotional abuse at the facility. But the prosecutor said he is worried that his case against Lichfield will fall flat if all the students are allowed to leave before giving depositions. "I am fighting with child welfare authorities to let kids give declarations before they leave the country," Vargas said Saturday. "Without them, I don't have a case."

Lichfield, meanwhile, said Saturday that he and his lawyers are in the process or assessing damage and filing a counter lawsuit against Vargas, who sparked a week of rioting and chaos at Dundee last Tuesday when he told the students that they did not have to remain their against their will (TT, May 23).

The academy owner said he will work with the government to define a clear set of operating rules and then reopen the academy. He expects many of the students to be sent back, claiming "most of the parents loved what was going on here."

Lichfield, who compares himself to Joan of Arc, said: "if people are worried about human rights, they should try spending the night in a Costa Rican jail. My place was Club Med in comparison."

Prosecutor Fernando Vargas told The Tico Times Friday evening that he had formally requested that incarcerated Dundee Ranch Academy owner Narvin Lichfield be given a six-month preventive prison sentence while investigators continue to gather information and testimony from students.

In the event the judge decides to release Lichfield, Vargas has requested bail at $256,000 and a court order impede Lichfield and his Costa Rican wife Flory Alvarado from leaving the country.

Lichfield, meanwhile, abstained from giving a declaration to the judge this afternoon. The judge is expected to rule on the case tonight around 10 p.m.

The Dundee owner was arrested at 9 p.m. Thursday on charges of detaining children against their will, coercion and attempting to obstruct justice by using his international connections to send kids to the WorldWide Association of Specialty Program's (WWASP) behavior-modification facility in Jamaica.

The Prosecutor's Office today received its first formal complaint from a former student, alleging he was subject to physical and emotional abuse at the academy.

WWASP president Ken Kay told The Tico Times Friday afternoon that he did not know of any Dundee students being sent to Jamaica, but said he would look into it.

The Prosecutor's Office last night confiscated documentation and computers from Dundee Ranch's administrative offices in the Pacific-slope town of Orotina. Investigators today are continuing to interview the remaining students and gather evidence against Lichfield, Vargas explained.

Vargas said that during Thursday's intervention several mini-buses full of students attempted to leave the facility, claiming they were "going home." Vargas, however, said he began to suspect that Lichfield was attempting to interfere in the investigation when he realized that none of the children being bused off had plane tickets, luggage or their passports, which were found locked in the Dundee office.

The Child Welfare Office (PANI) has intervened in the matter and is present at the academy, but Dundee staff is still in control of the facility, the Prosecutor said.

Kay sent a communiqué to Dundee parents on Friday, saying: "At this point, with the Director no longer at the facility, we feel the students need to move from Dundee."

Kay told The Tico Times Friday afternoon, however, that Dundee was still open and in "good standing" with WWASP. He said he is going to talk with Lichfield as soon as he can to "sort out the facts and assess the plausibility of continuing business in Costa Rica." (May 26th, 2003.)

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