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Narvin Lichfield Plans to Reopen Academy at Dundee Ranch

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Determined to get things right the second time around, Utah native Narvin Lichfield told The Tico Times this week that he is changing the operational model of his embattled behavior modification facility Dundee Ranch Academy and hopes to have it up and running again by the end of August.

The controversial "tough-love" program for wayward U.S. teens was closed May 24, following a week of rioting, students running away and violent upheaval sparked by two government interventions to investigate allegations of abuse. Lichfield was jailed for 24 hours on allegations of detaining minors against their will, coercion and international rights violations.

The 200 students were returned to their homes in the U.S. or relocated to other sister-affiliated WorldWide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP) in the U.S. and Jamaica (TT May 23, 30).

Lichfield and his Tica wife Flory are under court order to remain in the country while allegations of abuse are investigated.

As a result of his legal problems in Costa Rica, the Department of Social Services (DSS) in South Carolina last month slapped Lichfield with a restraining order prohibiting him from returning to his other teen facility, known as Carolina Springs. The U.S. child welfare authorities notified Carolina Springs that it has to make nine changes if it hopes to renew its license to operate a residential group home.

"Mr. Narvin Lichfield shall not be allowed on the premises of Carolina Springs, nor shall he be involved in the day to day operations of the facility at this time due to the criminal and child welfare allegations surrounding his involvement in the Costa Rican facility," reads a letter sent June 19 to Carolina Springs director Elaine Davis from the Department of Social Services. "Once the allegations/charges are resolved, the Board of Directors can submit the supporting documentation to DSS for consideration to determine if Mr. Lichfield can resume his involvement with children and the managerial decision making at Carolina Springs."

The list of complaints filed by the South Carolina DSS closely mirrors the list complied by the Child Welfare Agency (PANI) here: overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, untrained staff, restricted contact with parents and the outside world, and "upper-level" students involved in the disciplining of "lower-level" students (TT, May 23).

The DSS offered Carolina Springs a standard operating license with a waiver through Oct. 30, 2003. The agreement allows the Stateside academy to continue operating until October, on condition that the board of directors agrees to make the necessary changes to comply with the law.

However, Carolina Springs' lawyers reportedly have said that they do not agree to all the terms set by welfare authorities, which could result in the facility being closed by the state before Oct. 30, according to Virginia Williamson of the Carolina DSS office.

Despite facing similar problems in two countries and criminal allegations here, Lichfield this week said he remains hopeful that he can ride out the storm and get his Costa Rican facility operational again.

The Child Welfare Agency (PANI) originally notified Lichfield May 21 that he had 30 days to make 15 critical changes if he hoped to get legal and remain open. However, following the ensuing chaos, Lichfield decided to close the school three days later.

Lichfield told The Tico Times this week that he is in the process of repairing an estimated $2 million in vandalism-caused damages at his remote Costa Rican facility - formerly an eco-tourism hotel in the Pacific slope town of Orotina - and hopes to get licensed by Ministry of Health.

PANI spokeswoman Fanny Cordero this week said that Lichfield would have to comply with all the requirements of the Technical Secretariat of Protection in order to apply for a license to reopen. To date, neither Lichfield nor his lawyers have been in contact with the PANI office, she said.

The new and improved Dundee Ranch, according to Lichfield, will not employ the controversial disciplinary practices of physical restraints or solitary confinement; will be based on a therapeutic model of treatment; and will provide each student with a laptop computer with Internet access to facilitate open communication with parents. "Like Coronado," Lichfield said, referring to the model used by the U.S.-run boarding school Coronado Academy, on the central Pacific coast north of Quepos (TT, June 6).

Lichfield, 42, said tuition will most likely increase to $2,300 a month to cover therapy costs, and admitted he is not sure Dundee will continue its affiliation with WWASP.

He said he is not concerned that the negative media attention he and Dundee have received in recent months will hurt his operation, claiming he will be able to start again with a fresh slate because there is no such thing as bad press.

"I understand people's concerns," he said. "If I were not involved with Dundee and were on the outside looking in, I would have been concerned too."

However, he added, "Talking about abuse is like yelling 'fire' in a crowded building; it doesn't matter if there is a fire, people react as if there was."

Lichfield insists that a reopened Dundee would be good for the local economy, employing area residents and pumping $2 million a year into the "tourism" economy.

"If we get this thing taken care of, 90 people will return to their jobs," he said.

The Dundee owner admits that his ability to reopen depends on the outcome of the legal proceedings against him, but said he is "thankful for the legal process" because his critics will now be required to present evidence of abuse, not just e-mail allegations.

He insists that he has never abused any child entrusted to his care, and thinks the case mounting against him will fall flat.

The prosecutor's case against Lichfield is based on abuse charges filed by former Dundee mother Robin Crawford and her son Cody, but other witnesses have yet to come forward (TT, June 6).

Meanwhile, the long-threatened class-action lawsuit against WWASP in the U.S. has not been filed yet, despite lawyer Ed Masry's claim last month that his California-based firm Masry & Vititoe and the Huron Law Group were planning to file on June 20. The firms are reportedly still trying to unravel the spiderweb of WWASP corporate entities in the U.S. (TT, June 20).

Lichfield said he is offended that his character has been tarnished internationally, and eventually plans to pursue legal action against the Costa Rican daily Al Día, The New York Times and everyone else who dragged his name through the mud.

He said the final straw was when a classmate of his daughter's in Utah presented a news article for current events on "Narvin Lichfield abusing kids in Costa Rica."

"I want my name restored after being slandered all over the world. I have been vilified and made out to be something I'm not," Lichfield stressed.

However, he added: "In the end it doesn't matter what is said in the papers, because it is an illusion, it is not real, and it disappears after two weeks."

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