The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20080905092830/http://www.wwaspsinfo.net/dundee…

Dundee Case Still Worries U.S. Parents

By Tim Rogers

Tico Times Staff

November 28, 2003

Six months after the closure of Dundee Ranch Academy, tough-love program owner Narvin Lichfield of Utah once again is a free man.

The restrictions on his freedom, imposed by a Costa Rican judge May 23 following Lichfield's brief arrest on allegations of children's rights abuse, expired last Sunday and prosecutor Marielos Alfaro said she doesn't see a need to request a six-month extension of his prohibition on leaving the country.

Lichfield, who is currently enrolled in Spanish classes as he plans to reopen his academy under a different name and a gentler, therapeutic model, insists he is not going to leave the country to avoid the on-going investigation.

"I am still confused what I was arrested for in the first place," Lichfield said with a laugh, adding that the truth soon will absolve him of abuse charges.

"The truth is the most important thing. Was it true that kids were abused? I admit, there were a lot of things that happened [at Dundee] that I didn't know about, but I don't think there really was [abuse]," Lichfield told The Tico Times this week.

Meanwhile, a growing number of parents of former academy students in the United States are expressing concern that the investigation here into what happened at Dundee has been shelved, and that charges will not be pressed against Lichfield.

Distanced by a couple thousand miles, an unfamiliar judicial system and a language barrier, some of the U.S. parents say they are feeling powerless.

For several months, a group of 12 former Dundee students has been prepared to return to Costa Rica to testify to allegations of physical and emotional mistreatment suffered at the hands of former Dundee staff.

But no court date has been set by the prosecutor or the judge, and the parents are hesitant to fly their children down unannounced.

"I am concerned that when parents have tried to call the prosecutor's office, they are told 'No English!' and hung up on," said Karen Burnett, mother of a former Dundee student.

Prosecutor Alfaro admits that no one in her office speaks English, but said that former students can come down to Costa Rica anytime to give their testimony. They will be received with "no problem," she said.

Located on the remote grounds of a former eco-hotel about 15 kilometers from the Pacific-slope community of Orotina, Dundee Ranch Academy was an affiliate of the Utah-based WorldWide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP). The non-therapeutic behavior-modification facility, home to 200 troubled teenagers mostly from the United States, was operated under the philosophy of "identify your incorrect behavior, and stop doing it," according to Lichfield.

But some of the methods Dundee staff members used to help wayward teens identify their "incorrect behavior" -- including solitary confinement, physical restraint and allegations of drug-induced sedation -- were blasted by critics as abusive (TT, Oct. 25, 2002; Jan. 17, March 14).

Last May, the mother of one Dundee student filed a complaint with the Atenas Prosecutor's Office, where Prosecutor Fernando Vargas was substituting for the regular prosecutor who was on vacation. Vargas immediately asked Judge Gabriela Saborío to authorize a government intervention of Dundee.

The interventions, which occurred on May 20 and 22, spiraled out of control when Vargas tried to explain to the children their rights under Costa Rican law. Several dozen youth escaped from the campus, while others rioted and vandalized the facility.

Lichfield was detained for 24 hours before being released on conditional freedoms. He closed the academy May 24 and the students were whisked back to their parents in the United States or to other WWASP programs in the United States and Jamaica (TT, May 23, May 30).

The Ombudsman's Office blasted the Child Welfare Agency's handling of the situation as "permissive and tolerant" of alleged abuse, and recommended that child welfare authorities develop new protocol for situations where children are at high risk (TT, Sept. 12).

Prosecutor Fernando Vargas, who was removed from Dundee case a week after the May raids when prosecutor Marielos Alfaro returned from vacation, also is raising a critical voice against Costa Rica's handling of the case.

In July, he filed a complaint with the Internal Judicial Inspector's Office against Judge Saborío, who he claims interfered with his ability to gather necessary evidence during the interventions, and acted inappropriately in a situation where children were asking for help.

Saborío denies any wrongdoing, but said she could not comment further because she is the subject of an ongoing internal investigation.

Vargas also is critical of the current prosecutor's handling of the case, which he claims is "passive" and not being conducted with the importance that it deserves. He claims he did more to advance the investigation in the week following the raid, than anything that has been done in the last six months.

Alfaro told The Tico Times that the investigation is still open, and denied it is not being given its due importance. She said her office is still waiting for confiscated documents to be translated into Spanish, as well as other proof from the Judicial Investigative Police (OIJ).

Alfaro explained that she is the only prosecutor in Atenas and is handling about 500 ongoing cases, many older than the Dundee case. She stressed that all cases are given equal importance, and that the Dundee matter will be resolved in due time.

Vargas argues the case would be moved along faster if there was more public and media pressure. He blames the relatively mild public reaction to the Dundee situation on a general perception that the issue is a "gringo problem."

If the students had been Costa Ricans, the public's reaction and the prosecution's handling of case would be much different, Vargas charged.

"There is a perception that these problems were brought here; that they are not ours," Vargas said. "And there is resentment: why do we have to deal with it when the U.S. knew about [WWASP] for years?"

WWASP, which currently has 10-affiliated programs in the United States and abroad, has operated in the U.S. for more than a decade. Dundee was the fourth WWASP program to close after being investigated for rights violations.

Earlier this month, U.S. congressman George Miller wrote to U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft and requested a federal probe of WWASP (TT, Nov. 7). Miller's office has not yet received a reply, according to a congressional aid.

Alfaro vigorously denied the nationality of the alleged victims has anything to do with the prosecution's handling of the case.

"Whether they are gringos, Nicas or whoever, the law applies to all cases and each is given equal importance," she said.

Vargas claims the Dundee case is one of the most important in the country, and that Costa Rica, with its moral authority and progressive laws to protect children's rights, is the perfect venue to put WWASP on trial.

"If Dundee falls in Costa Rica, then WWASP falls in the rest of the world, but if Dundee doesn't fall, WWASP will only get stronger," Vargas said.

Lichfield, meanwhile, said that in the last six months he has injected $600,000 into his new academy, which he hopes to open by Jan. 1 on the same Orotina campus. He said the new academy will not be affiliated with WWASP because of the "negative attached to it."

Lichfield said he will be a consultant to the new academy, and will not be part of the ownership group, which will headed by former director Francisco Bustos and new director Herald Dabel, a Spanish professor from South Carolina.

The controversial "High Impact" boot-camp compound that Lichfield was building on the Dundee campus has since been converted into a recreational center with a weight room and movie theater, Lichfield said.

Child Welfare Minister Rosalía Gil has told The Tico Times she will not allow Dundee to reopen here.

Lichfield, however, said he will use the $2 million in estimated damages to Dundee as leverage to convince authorities to allow him to reopen an appropriate facility that the "Costa Rican government is comfortable with."

Lichfield, who said he donated $10,000 to campaign of President Abel Pacheco, claims he has appealed to the President for help, but added Pacheco probably "doesn't want to touch us with a 10-foot poll."

For now, Lichfield wants to put the past behind him and "get back to what we do, and that's help kids."

---

home page

Return to Academy at Dundee Ranch Page