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Wilderness therapy school closes abruptly

Jennifer Moody (https://web.archive.org/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/users/profile/Jennifer%20Moody)
Jul 8, 2012

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SCIO — The Catherine Freer Wilderness Program abruptly closed last month, along with its Scio-based therapy school, Santiam Crossing.

The school closure decision came with about a week's notice to parents of teens enrolled in the programs, leaving at least one wondering when, or if, she'll get her money back.

"There's been no contact with them. They don't answer emails, they don't answer phone calls," said the parent, a mid-valley resident who asked not to be identified because of her child's medical situation. "They owe me over $21,000."

Rob Cooley, founder and president of the Catherine Freer program, said in a brief phone interview that the ongoing recession forced the closure decisions. He said a financial plan is being "worked on" but said he couldn't say how, or if, payments would be made to families with unfulfilled treatment obligations.

"The board has the ultimate authority about that," he said.

A June 12 press release on the Catherine Freer website announces both Cooley's retirement and the closure of the Albany-based wilderness therapy business, which was separate from Santiam Crossing. That program shut down June 25.

In the press release, Cooley said fewer insurance companies now pay for the program, and the struggling economy made it hard to find families who could afford it without their help.

The closure decision "was a difficult one, but fiscally, it was the right one," Cooley wrote.

The press release stated the therapeutic boarding school would remain open, which was the plan at the time, Cooley said. The website message has not yet been changed.

Cooley said in the phone interview that the Santiam Crossing decision came later, although he was unsure of the exact date. The school sent students home on July 3.

He said there were multiple issues that he was not prepared to talk about at the moment, adding, "The primary thing was the recession."

Cooley said the program was not involved in any lawsuits, and a public records search turned up no reports of any filings.

The county assessor's office indicates Cooley's business, Mountain Glen Wilderness LLC, which owns the Santiam Crossing property, currently owes $3,055 in taxes and interest for 2011.

The property, Cooley said, "belongs to the bank, you know. We haven't done an appraisal yet, chances are it's not quite enough to pay off all the loans."

Sheriff Tim Mueller said his office responded to a handful of runaway reports from the program, but has had no major investigations there.

Sixteen youths were displaced by the therapy school's closure, Cooley said, some of whom had recently joined. He said some of the management staff are continuing to work at both the school and the wilderness program, to wrap things up.

The mid-valley parent said her child had not yet completed the program and she was wondering what would happen to parents' last month's deposits.

She said she was told in an email on June 28 that she'd get a letter from Cooley about financial issues, but she has received no communication since. Nor has she received any referrals for new placement or continued treatment.

"So here are these kids, in a therapuetic program, and some of these kids have serious mental health problems and they (families) are just scrambling," the parent said. "I have no clue what's happening now. They are shut down and they're not communicating."

Cooley founded Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Expeditions in 1988, in memory of Freer, a longtime friend and elite mountain climber who perished with her climbing partner the year before.

The program combined wilderness settings with behavior management therapy delivered by licensed counselors to help combat both drug and behavioral problems. It started with multiple-week wilderness treks, and in 2004 grew to include the outdoor therapeutic boarding school known as Santiam Crossing.

The 157-acre campus east of Scio housed girls and boys ages 14 to 18 in canvas-walled tents. Schooling took place in a yurt. Teens were eligible to attend only if they'd first completed a wilderness trek.

Janet Selby of Philomath brought her son, Mark, to the Catherine Freer program in December 2005. She was looking for a way to help him break down the walls he'd built through anger and drug abuse after his father died.

Mark did three wilderness treks before transferring to Santiam Crossing, Selby said. He learned self-sufficiency and coping skills, and to open up to others about his pain. The experience totally transformed Mark, she said.

The family had three good years together before Mark was killed in a car accident in November 2010. In his memory, Selby established a scholarship to send other Philomath youths in need to Santiam Crossing. She said she's not sure yet what will happen to that fund, which is being administered by the Philomath Community Foundation.

"I'm sorry. I can't believe it. What an amazing announcement," Selby said of the closure. "I'm saddened."

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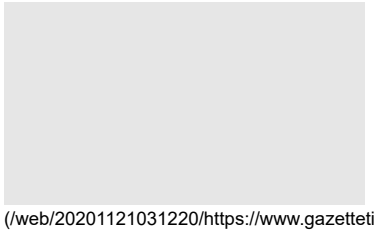

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Updated Nov 19, 2020

Albany Police Chief Marcia Harnden got an early morning call from a state senator on Wednesday.

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Corvallis City Council passes homeless motions (/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/corvallis-city-council-passes-homeless-motions/article_08a1b928-db88-50a1-9a8e-b3099c15aaf5.html)

Updated Nov 17, 2020

The Corvallis City Council wants to the city to take quicker action on homelessness.

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Six more Oregonians die of coronavirus, 51 mid-valley cases announced (/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/six-more-oregonians-die-of-coronavirus-51-mid-valley-cases-announced/article_74554e1d-ced8-5767-9bcc-2735d9580bc8.html)

Updated Nov 18, 2020

State health officials reported Saturday the death of six more Oregonians due to the coronavirus in addition to 1,097 new confirmed and presu…

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Corvallis police warn of hazardous batteries after Tesla crash (/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/corvallis-police-warn-of-hazardous-batteries-after-tesla-crash/article_2b18a105-4788-5e49-aa03-484bf9f6aca4.html)

Updated Nov 18, 2020

Batteries that may be a danger to the public are strewn about a neighborhood in Corvallis after a late night crash saw a Tesla severely damage…

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Toledo woman finds message in a bottle written by young Corvallis boy (/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/toledo-woman-finds-message-in-a-bottle-written-by-young-corvallis-boy/article_81574f7b-024f-55ee-afb6-8c13e6dee27b.html)

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Eller, if you're out there, someone found your message in a bottle.

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Business opposition grows to Brown's COVID-19 'freeze' (/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/business-opposition-grows-to-browns-covid-19-freeze/article_776898c8-919c-5c3b-a49c-cc0416105c77.html)

Updated Nov 18, 2020

A growing number of businesses and business organizations are opposing Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's statewide "freeze" to slow the spread of COVID-19.

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Albany continues to have most COVID-19 cases in Linn, Benton counties (/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/albany-continues-to-have-most-covid-19-cases-in-linn-benton-counties/article_cbef0357-bd36-5d10-8a04-5c46111f6e80.html)

Updated Nov 18, 2020

The Albany area continues to have the most COVID-19 cases in Linn and Benton counties, with 554, up nearly 100 instances of the illness from j…

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Residents urged to avoid section of downtown Albany due to fire (/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/residents-urged-to-avoid-section-of-downtown-albany-due-to-fire/article_49b608e2-ebcf-50a4-bba1-c7c0530c1872.html)

Nov 17, 2020

Residents are being urged to avoid the area of downtown Albany between Ferry and Washington streets and Second and Third avenues due to a fire…

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Oregon has 1,000-plus cases again; Benton woman dies (/web/20201121031220/https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/oregon-has-1-000-plus-cases-again-benton-woman-dies/article_c8877ee4-9059-5402-9c2c-384f14f10f42.html)

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Oregon recorded more than 1,000 new coronavirus cases for the second day in a row, while one of the state's seven latest fatalities was a Bent…

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Updated Nov 18, 2020

A New Jersey man was arrested for allegedly stalking and harassing a former girlfriend and moving into her Corvallis apartment complex.

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