J of Sagewalk, Youth Care, and Excelsior Youth Center

Aright y'all, strap in because this is about to be a LONG and intense ride down trauma lane.

I want to preface by saying that I do not necessarily blame my parents for sending me away, as I do believe they were manipulated to think it was the best option for me. But I do harbor a lot of resentment towards them for it. I am not sure I will ever be able to fully let go.

Let us begin.

SAGEWALK, OR:

In 2005, I was awoken in the middle of the night and kidnapped by two complete strangers- a man and a woman. In my delirium, all I really remember is being told that I could "do this the hard way or the easy way," and my parents standing behind them. I remember being so confused that my parents were just letting these people kidnap me. I went the easy way and walked outside with them to a white van where they drove me from my home in California to the headquarters/offices of Sagewalk, a wilderness program for troubled teens in Oregon. I was drug tested with a couple of other kids (this was a whole issue for me because my drug test supposedly came up positive for PCP, which I'd never even heard of, and the rest of my treatment plan would consist of unnecessary drug treatment and brainwashing to believe I was a drug addict). I was strip-searched, and all my clothes and belongings were taken from me and replaced with a set of bright orange clothes and a huge heavy backpack that I could barely lift, filled with the bare essentials for survival (mind you, I was 15 years old at the time and absolutely terrified by strangers seeing and searching my naked body). I was then blindfolded and driven for what seemed like hours to the middle of nowhere. They told me that trying to run would be useless because we were nowhere near any roads or civilization anymore, so I wouldn't survive if I tried to run. I met up with a small group of other girls and some staff members.

From there, my time at Sagewalk consisted of strenuous hiking and generally just trying to survive. We hiked anywhere from 5-30 miles almost every day (carrying those heavy backpacks). There were no showers or bathrooms. At the end of every hike, we were instructed to dig a communal "Latrine" with large sticks or branches we found in the woods (no shovels). It was just a big hole in the ground. I remember squatting over that hole to use the bathroom while flies swarmed around everyone's excrement and feeling absolutely disgusting. Our diets consisted of plain unseasoned grain-like foods (oats, lentils, beans, rice, etc.) that we cooked over the fires we had to start ourselves with flint and steel. If we couldn't start a fire, we didn't eat. Food and laundry drop was once every other week, and we had to make that little bag of food last two weeks and wore the same clothes every day without being washed. Some days we had to skip meals to keep hiking, and I just remember feeling so hungry all the time. We had to use dirty sticks we found on the ground to eat, no utensils. We also had to eat whatever we made so as not to waste food; I remember one girl who made too much oatmeal one morning, and they forced her to continue eating it as she was vomiting. Every morning we had exactly 5

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minutes to pack up our sleeping bags and shelters from the night before and be dressed and ready to hike. If anyone didn't make it in that 5 minutes, everyone was punished and had to unpack everything and do it again until we all got it right. We had to set up shelters every night with tarps they gave us to tie to trees, and we just slept on the ground under those tarps. Some nights were unbearably cold. They took our shoes at night, so we wouldn't run away.

My feet became extremely calloused and cracked and often bled, but I was forced to continue hiking. If one person stopped hiking out of exhaustion, we were all punished. One of those punishments was finding rocks to fill our pockets to add more weight, and then we would continue hiking. At some point in the program, you have to go "solo"- which is separating from the group and staff and surviving on your own in silence without help from the group. They gave me a whistle in case any bears came along, so that was nice of them, I guess?

After your solo in silence was over, they did some supposedly Native American ceremony where you were "reborn" and given a new name. My name was Phoenix Rising From Obsidian Mountain. Honestly, looking back, it was pretty gross as this whole place was run by white people, and I'm sure that was some kind of bastardized version of an actual Native American ceremony.

Sagewalk was closed in 2009 after a boy collapsed and died during one of the hikes.

YOUTH CARE, UT:

After spending 33 days at Sagewalk- I was transferred to Youthcare in Utah, where I spent the next five months. It took over a week and several showers to get my hair unmatted and all the dirt off my body from Sagewalk.

Youthcare was/is a coed program and set up like a large house with several rooms. Each room had four beds. There was a small classroom where we did schoolwork. There was also a small white room with no furniture and no windows for isolation if anyone misbehaved. Every day was just a tedious routine of breakfast, therapy, lunch/school, therapy, dinner, fucking therapy. This wasn't good helpful therapy either- this was brainwashing therapy used to make us believe we had been such horrible kids that needed to be reformed to fit our parents' and society's standards. It was all about how our presence and behavior negatively affected everyone else and not actually helpful for our problems. Remember that sketchy drug test I mentioned earlier? Yeah, so I was brainwashed to believe I was a drug addict, and if I said otherwise, then I was lying and manipulating them and my parents. I sat in group therapy with real addicts with actual problems relating to their addiction, and I felt like such a fraud. I started to make up stories to appease the therapists, and then I started to believe those stories.

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No phones, though we could write letters to our parents and anyone on our approved list of people. All letters were read before being sent to make sure we weren't saying anything untoward. All incoming mail was also opened and read before we got it. Many of us were heavily medicated. Again, if one person misbehaved, then the group was often punished. I remember sitting in a chair in silence, facing a wall for hours for something SOMEONE ELSE did. The whole program was just an emotional, psychological, and physical prison, dressed up to look like a nice place to treat your troubled kids.

Youthcare is still open today, as far as I know.

EXCELSIOR YOUTH CENTER, CO:

My next and final treatment center was Excelsior Youth Center in Colorado. This place was like a weird mash-up of a group home/juvenile hall/psychiatric facility.

There were several "cottages", which is just a nice way of saying lockdown dormitories. I was in Shalom cottage. There was a special unit called "TLC," which was just several small unfurnished rooms for solitary confinement. There was a sorry excuse for a school where I learned practically nothing. And a prison-like cafeteria. I don't really know what else to say about this place that hasn't already been said about these facilities at this point, my will and spirit had been completely broken, and I just did what I was told. I kept my head down more often than not, and so I didn't end up in a lot of trouble or experience the same punishments that other girls did. I lived here for the next year, just sort of aimlessly existing in their routines. There were some highlights, though, mainly some of the people I met and am still in contact with today.

Excelsior closed in 2017.

SIDENOTE: I wanted to also mention the outrageous lack of medical care in all of these facilities. I started experiencing severe abdominal pain at Sagewalk that had me curled up in the fetal position digging my feet into the dirt. They didn't believe that anything was wrong with me and didn't give me medical attention. Again, I experienced this pain at youth care and was told to just drink water. It wasn't until a home pass from EYC for thanksgiving when my parents took me to the ER after a particularly brutal episode that it was discovered I had an ovarian torsion. It had gotten so bad that my ovary has actually died and swollen to the size of a baseball, and I needed surgery to have it removed. I could have died if this continued to go untreated, and in fact, there was a kid who DID die at Youthcare in 2007 because they ignored his complaints of abdominal pain, which turned out to be a bowel infarction.

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In summation, I spent a total of 18 months in the hell that is residential treatment. I came out of treatment and did not even know how to function on my own. I was far worse off than when I went in, and it took a lot of time to un-program their brainwashing and find some sense of normalcy. My youth and formative years were effectively stolen from me. I still have extreme anxiety and other lasting effects on my psyche from my time there.

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