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Utah wilderness therapy deaths

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Editor's note: This article on Ian August ran in The Salt Lake Tribune July 13, 2003.

Since 1990, five teens have died while in the care of Utah-based wilderness therapy programs. After the state began regulating the programs in 1990, the programs involved in the first two deaths were given 90-day conditional licenses. Neither program

implemented all the new requirements and shut down.

Michelle Sutton, 15, of California, died May 9, 1990. Sutton was enrolled in Summit Quest of St. George. She died from altitude sickness, dehydration and heat exhaustion while hiking south of St. George on the Arizona Strip on her sixth day in the program. No criminal charges were brought, but her parents filed a federal lawsuit against the program, a group of physicians and a private psychologist. Summit Quest settled the case in 1992 for what was left of the company's insurance policy -- $345,000 -- and a judge dismissed the doctors and the psychologist from the suit.

Kristen Chase, 16, of Florida, died June 27, 1990. Chase was enrolled in the Challenger Foundation program of Escalante. Three days after arriving, she died of heatstroke on a hike in Kane County. Program owner Stephen Cartisano was charged with negligent homicide in her death and counts of child abuse for the treatment of other students. A jury acquitted him, but state officials determined the charges warranted placing his name on a registry of those banned from working with child-treatment programs in Utah. Chase's divorced parents filed a federal lawsuit against Challenger and Cartisano that was settled in 1994 for $260,000 in insurance money. Her mother received 70 percent of the settlement amount, the father 30 percent, and $91,000 went to attorneys' fees.

Aaron Bacon, 16, of Arizona, died March 31, 1994. Bacon was enrolled in North Star Expeditions of Escalante. He was three weeks into a 63-day wilderness trek on the Hole-in-the-Rock trail in Garfield County, 15 miles southeast of Escalante, when he died of peritonitis and a perforated ulcer. Eight North Star staff members were charged with felony neglect and abuse of a disabled child. A jury convicted supervising counselor Craig Fisher and a judge ordered him to spend one year in the Garfield County jail. Five others, including program co-owners Bill Henry and Lance Jaggar, pleaded guilty to reduced misdemeanor charges of negligent homicide, with a judge suspending any jail time and ordering community service and restitution. A seventh counselor pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of attempted abuse of a disabled child and also received a sentence of probation and community service. The eighth employee signed a diversion agreement that dismissed the case against him in return for nine months' good behavior. The state filed to void the license of North Star Expeditions and the program shut down before an administrative hearing was held.

Katie Lank, 16, of Virginia, died Jan. 13, 2002. Lank was enrolled in Redrock Ranch Academy of St. George. She was hiking about 25 miles from Gunlock Reservoir in Washington County on Christmas Day in 2001, lost her footing in an area called the "naming caves," and fell about 70 feet into a crevasse. She died three weeks later at a Las

Vegas hospital. No criminal charges were brought. Her parents filed a federal lawsuit against the program, director Abe Dalley and field director Clint Dalley, that settled for a confidential amount earlier this year. The state filed to void the company's license but stopped short by agreeing to suspend the program if new leaders were hired and new training was completed. The program, however, closed on its own a week before the suspension was to begin.

Ian August, 14, of Texas, died July 13, 2002. August was enrolled in Skyline Journey of Nephi. He was on a hike about 70 miles west of Delta when he could not hike any farther. He died of hyperthermia. Program supervisor Mark Wardle and counselor Leigh Hale were charged with child abuse homicide. The charges against Hale were dropped after she testified for prosecutors, and a judge found there was not enough evidence against Wardle to take the case to trial. The state has filed to remove Skyline Journey's license, and an administrative judge is set to hear the case Aug. 18. The program is still in operation.Nationwide deaths

Nationwide deaths

A widely circulated list of "wilderness therapy program" deaths includes the names of more than 30 teens who have died in other states. Research by The Salt Lake Tribune shows some teens were in wilderness programs, while others were in boot camps, therapeutic boarding schools or centers and correction facilities. Teens who died in wilderness therapy programs in other states include the following:

1. Cory Baines, 14, of California, died March 25, 2003, while camping with the Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy program at Waldo Lake in the Willamette National Forest in Oregon when a tree limb fell on the tent he was sleeping in.

2. Charles Moody, 17, of Texas, died Oct. 14, 2002, at On Track of Mason, Texas, of asphyxiation after being restrained.

3. Erica Harvey, 15, of Arizona, died of heat stroke and dehydration May 27, 2002, while with the Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Expeditions after a three-mile hike in the Arc Dome Wilderness in Nevada.

4. Ryan Lewis, 14, of Massachusetts, died Feb. 13, 2001, in the West Virginia-based Alldredge Academy (renamed Ayne Institute in August) after he hanged himself from a tree with a tent cord.

5. William Edward Lee, 15, of Oregon, died Sept. 18, 2000, at Obsidian Trails in Bend, Ore., of an injury to a vertebral artery at the base of his skull after being restrained by counselors.

6. Michael Wiltsie (Ibarra), 12, of Florida, died Feb. 5, 2000, in Camp E-Kel-Etu run by Eckerd Youth Alternatives of Florida from suffocation a day after a 320-pound counselor sat on him as a method of restraint.

7. Dawnne Takeuchi, 18, of California, died June 28, 1995, near Pagosa Springs, Colo., while enrolled in the Tucson, Ariz.-based VisionQuest. Takeuchi died of injuries suffered after being thrown from a supply semi-truck driven by a camp counselor, who was convicted of careless driving.

8.-15. Bernard Reefer, 19, of Pennsylvania; Robert Zimmerman, 17, of Pennsylvania; Charles M. Lucas, 16, of Pennsylvania; James Lamb, 14, of Pennsylvania; Eric D. Schibley, 17, of Arizona; Roger Doyle Erwin, 15, of Arizona; John Moran, 17, of Pennsylvania; and Lyle Foodroy, age unknown, of Colorado.

The teens died Nov. 24, 1980, on an OceanQuest expedition, operated by Tucson-based VisionQuest, when their boat capsized off the coast of Baja California during a storm.

Teens who died in therapeutic boarding schools, boot camps or state-run correctional facilities include the following:

1. Travis Ballard, 15, of Oklahoma, died Sept. 3, 2001, at the Thunderbird Youth Academy in Pryor, Okla., of heat stroke after exercising in hot weather.

2. Valrie Ann Heron, 17, of Alabama, died Aug. 10, 2001, after she plunged to her death from a balcony at Tranquility Bay in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica.

3. Anthony Haynes, 14, died July 1, 2001, in American Buffalo Soldiers Camp near Buckeye, Ariz., after being placed in a tub of water for dehydration treatment. Cause of death listed as dehydration and near-drowning.

4. Bryan Dale Alexander, 18, of Texas, died Jan. 9, 2001, in Tarrant County Community Corrections Center of pneumonia.

5. Brian Adams, age and home state unknown, died March 2000 in a Michigan program.*

6. Adora Grae Stout, 17, of Tennessee, died Jan. 9, 2000, in the Buffalo Mountain Camp (run by Omni Visions Inc. of Tennessee) of cardiac arrest during a camping trip.

7. Gina Score, 14, of South Dakota, died July 21, 1999, in the South Dakota State Training School in Plankinton of heat stroke after being forced to run in warm weather.

8. Chad Andrew Franza, 16, of Florida, died Aug. 17, 1998, in the Polk County Juvenile Boot Camp in Florida, after hanging himself from his boot laces in his cell.

9. Nicholaus Contreraz, 16, of California, died March 2, 1998, in Arizona Boys Ranch in Oracle, Ariz., of untreated infections.

10. Edith Campos, 15, of California, died Feb. 4, 1998, in Desert Hills Center for Youth & Families in Tucson, Ariz., of suffocation after a counselor physically restrained her.

11. Carlos Ruiz, 13, address unknown, died Dec. 16, 1994, in Tucson, Ariz.-based VisionQuest.*

12. Lorenzo Johnson, 17, of Mississippi, drowned in a canal on June 27, 1994, while trying to escape from Arizona Boys Ranch in Oracle, Ariz.

13. John Avila, age and address unknown, died July 25, 1994, in Rocky Mountain Academy in Idaho.*

14. Jamie Young, 13, of Tucson, Ariz., died June 2, 1993, in Ramsey Canyon Hospital and Treatment Center in Sierra Vista, Ariz., of heat exhaustion after hiking in Tanque Verde Falls in Arizona.

15. Paul Choy, 16 , of California, died Feb. 4, 1992, in Rite of Passage in Shurz, Nev., of asphyxiation after being restrained by counselors.

16. Mario Cano, 16, of California, died April 27, 1984, in Tucson, Ariz.-based VisionQuest of a blood clot while doing calisthenics.

*Further information not available.

Sources: Published newspaper articles; Cathy Sutton, mother of Michelle Sutton, the first to die in a Utah wilderness therapy program; http://www.teenadvocatesusa.org; http://www.nospank.net

