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Officials to Investigate 'Tough Love' Facility Here

By Tim Rogers
Tico Times Staff

It's not exactly the traditional "happily ever after" storybook ending, but Carey Bock is calling last week's court battle in the U.S. against her former husband a "victory for the family."

Three months after liberating her twin sons Garred and Geoffrey, 17, from the controversial behavior modification program at Costa Rica's Dundee Ranch Academy, a Louisiana judge ruled Jan. 9 that Ms. Bock did not violate a court order by busting her kids out of the program, and the boys will not be forced to go back.

Rosalia Gil, Minister of Costa Rica's Child Welfare Agency (PANI), told The Tico Times this week she was "worried" about reports on Dundee Ranch and is taking steps to open an official investigation.

Bock's former husband, Mike Bock, originally wanted his sons returned to Dundee, a former hotel located on a 40-acre campus surrounded by cattle farms on the Central Pacific slope near Orotina (TT, Oct. 25, 2002). Both boys have a history of drug abuse and severe discipline problems, and their father thought the academy's extreme "tough-love" methods might get them back on the right track.

But following court testimony from psychiatrist David Clark, who has been counseling the twins since they returned from Dundee last October, the judge and even Mr. Bock ultimately agreed the boys should not be sent back to Costa Rica.

"The boys are not going back to Dundee; they are going to stay here and get the help they need," said a relieved Ms. Bock during a phone interview this week.

Dundee Ranch Academy - the newest affiliate of the Utah-based WorldWide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP) - is home to 163 troubled teenagers, mostly from the United States. The WWASP's nine programs in the U.S. and abroad have come under fire and repeated lawsuits from critics who claim the facilities are run more like prison camps than educational institutions (TT, Oct. 25, 2002).

Boosters of the WWASP programs argue that extreme disciplinary measures are necessary to help troubled teens struggling with extreme problems.

"We are not here to punish kids; that is not part of the program," said Utah native Joe Atkin, director of Dundee Ranch.

But allegations of psychological and physical abuse - including pinning students' arms behind their backs or sentencing them to 12 hours of solitary confinement on their knees (known as Observational Placement, or O.P.) - have prompted authorities to raid or investigate affiliated programs in Mexico, the Czech Republic and Utah - all three of which are now closed.

Since the late 1990s, WWASP has been named in seven lawsuits in Utah courts by parents alleging negligence and abuse in its programs, The Salt Lake Tribune reported this week. However, WWASP has never paid any plaintiff a cent in

damages, and many of the cases have been dismissed, association president Ken Kay told the newspaper.

At Dundee Ranch, incoming "students" are stripped of all basic privileges - including the right to talk - and are punished for minor infractions, such as looking out the window, scratching themselves without permission, or looking at a member of the opposite sex. Students who habitually violate the academy's rules will soon be sentenced to serve time at Dundee's "High Impact" walled compound, where they will remain incarcerated until they walk 100 miles around a gravel track to win their freedom. High Impact is in the final stage of construction and scheduled to be open by early next month.

Those who manage to comply with the strict rules can earn points, and higher-level students are allowed to discipline lower-level or newly arrived students.

Not all kids sent to WWASP programs by parents or court order go willingly. In extreme cases, desperate parents pay burly "escorts" to literally break into their houses at night and drag kids off to one of WWASP's programs, in handcuffs if necessary. The same escorts -- part of a growing child behavior modification industry -- were hired by Ms. Bock to help bust her twins out of Dundee.

According to Dr. Clark, the Bock twins were "traumatized" by their experience at the academy, and, upon their return to the United States, acted "head down and compliant."

"They were terrified of the possibility of going back because of what they said goes on there," the psychiatrist told The Tico Times this week during a phone interview. "If what the boys say is true, they are both suffering legitimate stress disorder."

Clark became even more concerned when Geoffrey Bock recounted stories of being forced to "watch torture videos, so we would know how good we have it here."

"We would watch videos of people getting tortured in war camps; lots of stuff about Hitler and the Jew camps," he told The Tico Times last October.

Dundee owner and Utah native Narvin Lichfield said in October kids watch "education videos," but didn't know if any of them were on World War II.

The twins were allowed once a week to e-mail their father, living in Brazil. But Mr. Bock later discovered the glowing messages he was receiving were being monitored by the Dundee staff.

Atkin, son of J. Ralph Atkin, who owned the Czech Republic program that was closed for allegedly torturing and illegally imprisoning 57 children, denied e-mails are monitored, but said they should be. "We are not doing as much as we ought to be doing," he said this week.

However, a former Dundee employee told The Tico Times this week that staff regularly screened and commented on e-mails, as is specified in the enrollment agreement. Teen residents are not allowed direct access to the Internet, so all e-mails are sent and received by the staff.

Kristin Whitchurch, 15, recently returned to her home in St. Paul, Minnesota, after spending a year at Dundee for behavior problems. She said "manipulation is a big

issue" at the academy.

"We were afraid to write home about the program because we didn't want [staff] to think we were manipulating our parents," she said. "Some girls who wrote their parents about what was going on were confronted by staff."

Some parents are not allowed any communication with their children. Despite claiming to have joint custody of her daughter, Su Flowers was denied communication with 14-year-old Nicole, who was sent to the academy by her father.

Flowers claims she arranged to talk to her daughter for five minutes on Christmas, but Dundee staff did not answer the phone all day and then later told her via e-mail that future communication with Nicole was prohibited.

Another concerned mother, Karen Burnett of Shepherdsville, Kentucky, is also speaking out against the academy, following the return of her 17-year-old son Nathan, who was in the Costa Rica program from April to August 2002.

She claims the literature and promotional videotapes were misleading, and don't mention anything about "diet deprivation or physical restraint." When Burnett aired her concerns on private Internet message boards set up for the parents of Dundee students, she became worried about what she called the "cookie cutter" responses, telling her to "trust the program" and "you are being manipulated by your son."

"The parents are just as brainwashed as the kids," she charged.

Yet despite the growing criticism, defenders of Dundee - advertised on its Web page as a "Paradise for Change" - and the other WWASP institutions are adamant about the merits of the program. Atkin said 30 students are currently positioned to graduate from Dundee in the near future, and Lichfield claims those who make it through the program have a greater than 90% "non-relapse" rate.

Even Mr. Bock, despite agreeing that his sons should not be sent back to Dundee, claims it helped them.

"If they are here and they are doing well, there's only one reason for that; and that's the program," he said during last week's court case, as quoted by The Times Picayune.

Lichfield, a former used-car salesman with a background in marketing, claims he would send his own kids to the program because it teaches students to live with the consequences of their actions.

"I can choose to speed in my car, but the consequences of getting caught is having my rights removed," he said. "Most of the kids here have been speeding a long time."

Staff members are also expected to deal with the consequences of their actions. Two former academy employees were reportedly fired when a male staffer allegedly raped and assaulted a female staff member last August. Medical records at San José's CIMA hospital show the victim was treated for a brain hemorrhage resulting from her beating.

Atkin told The Tico Times this week the alleged victim was not raped or assaulted because no charges were filed. Asked what happened, he said: "I don't know exactly," and dismissed the incident a "non-issue."

The U.S. Embassy recently paid a visit to Dundee, but claims it found everything to be "status quo," according to spokeswoman Marcia Bosshart.

Other than periodic unannounced visits from the Embassy, Dundee, which is not legally registered as an educational institution in Costa Rica, has little contact with the outside world.

The academy claims on its Web page that ("The students) are visited every day by the local police department of Orotina," and the Child Welfare Agency (PANI) "checks on the students as well."

However, regional police commander Rafael Rodríguez told The Tico Times patrol cars pass Dundee Ranch twice a week as part of their regularly scheduled rounds, but police don't enter the compound unless called. Only once in the last several months have police entered the campus, when they were called to help look for a student who ran away, Rodríguez added.

The PANI, meanwhile, has not visited Dundee since 2001 because no formal complaints have been filed, according to regional chief Marta Jiménez, who claims she asked PANI Minister Gil to review information on the academy last October, but never heard back from her.

Gil, however, said Wednesday that based on The Tico Times' Oct. 25 report, the PANI is going to open an investigation of Dundee.