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Teen-ager leaps to her death at compound in Jamaica

By Lou Kilzer, News Staff Writer

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A 17-year-old Alabama girl plunged to her death last week, soon after arriving at a compound for troubled teens in Jamaica.

Valerie Ann Heron had been taken from her bed at 4 a.m. the previous day by a "transport team" working with an organization commonly known as Teen Help.

Her family had arranged her surprise removal to the isolated Tranquillity Bay compound.

The next day, Valerie bolted from a room at the compound, jumped from a 35-foot-high balcony and died.

Ken Kay, a spokesman for the Utah organization that sends kids to Tranquillity Bay and other tough detention compounds, said the death was a fluke.

"She may have been thinking, 'Well maybe I'll injure myself, hurt myself, and that way I can manipulate and get home,' " he said.

He said he is certain that it wasn't a suicide.

"My gut feeling is she was either doing it for attention or to escape," Kay said.

There are about 275 American kids at the Jamaican compound, one of several associated with Teen Help.

Others -- in Utah, the Czech Republic and Mexico -- have come under investigation for child abuse or other irregularities.

In Western Samoa, U.S. embassy officials said there was evidence of abuse at a Teen Help-related operation called Paradise Cove. It has since closed.

A related program in the Czech Republic was closed after a police raid. Authorities there also said there was evidence of abuse.

Kay and the owners of the various compounds have denied that abuse occurs. Kay says kids make up the charges to manipulate their parents into bringing them home.

Many parents have, in fact, come forward to say the programs have saved their troubled children from almost certain death or incarceration.

The programs typically separate the teens from their families for a year or more. The youths advance through 'levels,' gaining privileges such as privacy and time off from camp chores as they modify their behavior to strict rules.

The parents also undergo days of intensive psychological encounter sessions, during which they are sometimes encouraged to remember early childhood abuse, visit their inner "magical child" and gain freedom from negative thinking.

Teen Help and its related organizations are expanding. Kay said another compound should open in Costa Rica within three weeks.

A related boot-camp program, called High Impact, has opened in Mexico.

Stephanie Hecker, a Kansas City, Mo., mother, said she sent her son to High Impact after he washed out of Casa by the Sea, a Mexican Teen Help-related compound.

She said she went to Tecate, Mexico, to see her son but was allowed to view him only through a fence. She was not allowed to talk to him, and he was not allowed to see her.

She said she saw girls in the program carrying heavy bags of sand on their backs. The director, a man named Manuel, said it was a form of punishment, she said.

Kay said the Tecate program is not directly associated with his organization. But Hecker said that the billing address in St. George, Utah, is the same as the one she had for Casa by the Sea.

A coroner's inquest is planned for the girl's death in Jamaica.

Kay said he was aware of accusations that the program delayed getting help for the girl but said that was "an out-and-out blatant lie."

His son, Jay Kay, runs the Jamaica operation. Ken Kay said Jay was on the scene and cleared Valerie's air passage and rushed her to a hospital.

Valerie's parents are divorced. A lawyer representing her family declined to comment.

Rick Strawn, a former police officer who led the transport team that took Valerie to Jamaica, said the girl "showed absolutely no signs of suicidal tendency. I spent quite a bit of time with her. I absolutely do not think it was a suicide. It was a tragic end to a bad choice."



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