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Spring Creek's short leash

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By the summer of 2004 Janet Larson was at her wit's end. Her 17-year-old daughter Christina (both names have been changed) was drinking, smoking, sneaking out, doing drugs and lying. Her parents were worried sick she would drop out of school, end up in jail, or worse.

So they made a difficult decision that summer, a decision they hoped would change their daughter's life: They decided to send Christina to a private behavior modification program in Western Montana. Like thousands of parents around the country who send their children away in hopes of saving their lives, Christina's parents were convinced they had no other choice.

Her experience at Spring Creek Lodge in Thompson Falls did change Christina's life, but not in the way her parents expected. Less than two months after enrolling in the program, Christina was back home in southern California, dealing with what her mother calls the "shock treatment" she received at Spring Creek, as well as the news that a bunk-mate and friend at the school had killed herself just days after Christina's departure.

"Basically a pretty good kid"

Christina's problems began in the seventh grade when she was 12 years old. Prior to middle school, Christina had been an honor-roll student in the 99th percentile in her class. Then her grades took a dive and she began hanging out with a girl her mom considered bad news. She and her new best friend tried to run away. (They

were gone for a day.) She started smoking cigarettes and drinking. When her eighth-grade year rolled around, her grades went from bad to dismal.

Janet enrolled Christina in a private school and things improved for a while, but it didn't last.

"We started getting calls from school," recalls Janet. "They said she's not putting out her best effort and she was late to class all the time."

By her sophomore year, Christina was dating an 18-year-old drug dealer.

"She was in love with that guy," Janet says. "She was only 15 and he was 18 and he was dealing drugs. We didn't want our 15-year-old associating with this person. But she is a very stubborn young woman. I love her dearly but she is stubborn."

Her parents hired a therapist but progress was slow, and soon Janet realized it wasn't getting through to Christina.

When Christina was expelled her junior year for smoking dope, Janet was distraught and enrolled her daughter in a drug treatment program. Janet knew the situation was worsening, but she wasn't desperate yet.

"She was still basically a pretty good kid. Maybe I was in denial—I don't know—but it wasn't that bad."

By the end of the summer, however, Christina pushed her parents' trust to the breaking point.

She was caught skipping a friend's funeral to get high. That's when Janet decided to do something drastic.

"I started looking into wilderness treatment programs," Janet says. "I didn't want to be with her any more. She was lying, coming home smelling like alcohol and cigarettes all the time. She didn't care what we thought. She just lost all respect for us. She didn't care anymore."

Christina's parents had learned about a school in Thompson Falls, called Spring Creek Lodge, from a counselor in Christina's drug program. The counselor gave Janet a phone number and Janet made the call.

She made arrangements for Christina to enroll at Spring Creek in late August. Christina's counselor warned the teen she could run and have the police track her down and arrest her and then send her by paid escort service to Spring Creek, or she could go willingly.

"My counselor told me there was a gym there and I'd be going hiking and swimming and kayaking," Christina recalls. "It sounded like a great place where I could get away from everything and turn myself around. All I wanted to do [was] finish high school and work out."

Christina's parents thought it sounded too good to be true. Spring Creek was located in a beautiful mountain setting in Western Montana, far from the influences steering Christina into trouble. Marketing materials pictured smiling kids taking part in fun activities amongst towering conifers and quaint log buildings.

A woman named Glenda at Spring Creek assured Janet over the phone that the program could help. She said all the right things and had all the right answers. In hindsight, Janet realizes the school never interviewed Christina or did any kind of psychological examination of her daughter. They took Janet's word that Christina was a mess and said they would help get her life back on track.

The next thing Glenda did was hook Janet up with a loan officer. There was no discussion about Janet's financial situation or whether she and her husband could afford the $3,390 monthly tuition the school charged (not counting enrollment fees, therapy costs, incidentals and uniform expenses).

Looking back, Janet says she should have sensed something was wrong when Spring Creek was so quick to square the loan away, but she was now desperate.

"I couldn't stop worrying at night," she says. "She was going out at night and I didn't know what she was up to. She was not progressing in school. I was worried she was going to end up a heroin addict. I was afraid for our daughter."

So Christina and her dad flew to Spokane, where they rented a car and

drove to Spring Creek Lodge.

“Every time we stopped somewhere to get gas or something to eat I wanted to just run,” says Christina. “I remember thinking, ‘I can’t believe I’m getting dropped off in Montana.’ I was pissed off, but I kept telling myself, ‘I’m only going to be here for four months. I am going to get out of here. It’s not going to be forever.’”

She had good reason to think that. Her mother had promised her she would pick her up in a few months if everything was going okay.

Christina was terrified when she arrived at Spring Creek. After checking in she was given two tearful minutes to say goodbye to her dad, and then she was alone. For the next 42 days, Christina says she was told her parents weren’t coming for her like they said they would, that she would have to graduate the program or stay at Spring Creek indefinitely. Christina says she was made to believe that her parents had lied to her.

Janet says she saw her first red flag when her husband returned from dropping Christina off and told her they wouldn’t be able to talk to their daughter for three months.

Then, just days after Christina’s arrival at Spring Creek, Janet and her husband were instructed to sign a “commitment letter.”

“I did not want to [send] that letter, because it wasn’t true,” Janet recalls furiously. “That’s what the program does; it makes you lie to your kids.”

The commitment letter said Christina was expected to complete all phases of the Spring Creek program, a process that takes at least 18 months. The letter confirmed their commitment to the program, no matter how long it took.

Both parents signed.

“A lot of things set off bells in our heads,” says Janet. “We told her three or four months. I mean, basically, she’s a pretty good kid. Now I was lying to her. We don’t want her to lie to us and now we’re lying to her.”

The letter was delivered to Christina, who was devastated.

“I thought my parents had lied to me. I thought I was going to be there until I turned 18.”

Janet was concerned about her daughter’s state of mind, but she wasn’t allowed to talk to her. Program rules explicitly deny parents contact for the first two months, and even then, only monitored phone contact is allowed, and only if the child has achieved “advanced” status in Spring Creek’s program.

Students enrolled at Spring Creek, and other member facilities of the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASPS), follow a strictly regimented points-based program and are organized into “Families” with names like “Integrity,” “Serenity,” “Eternity” and “Innocence.” Families consist of 20 to 30 students and a staff member known as the “mother” or “father.” Students spend nearly every waking and sleeping moment with their Family. Families walk from classroom to cafeteria to their dorms in lockstep unison. According to news reports and families of students, a child can’t graduate the program until she demonstrates to the satisfaction of Spring Creek staff that she has taken responsibility for the actions that put her in the school in the first place. She must appear to believe that the program has saved her life. As reporter Decca Aitkenhead described the program at an affiliated facility called Tranquility Bay in Jamaica in a 2003 article in the London newspaper The Observer, “They must renounce their old self, espouse the program’s belief system, display gratitude for their salvation, and police fellow students who resist.”

The WWASPS program is based on the theory that behaviors can be modified by the enforcement of consequences. Inappropriate behaviors, therefore, are met with swift retribution.

When a child arrives at Spring Creek, she starts at Level 1. In order to graduate the program, she must accumulate merit points. Points are hard-earned and easily lost. Speaking out of turn, looking at a member of the opposite sex, or horsing around—according to a card the students wear around their necks—can cost a student a day’s worth of points. Insubordination or fighting can result in the loss of three levels.

Level 1 students are prohibited from talking to Level 2 students.

“If your levels add up to four you can talk to one another,” says one Spring Creek student.

According to Christina, advanced, or upper-level students, Levels 4, 5 and 6, have more freedom than lower-level students. Girls, for example, might get to wear some make-up. For three days each week, upperlevel students work as “junior staff.” They become the eyes and the ears of the staff when staff are out of sight, and they “consequence” other students who step out of line.

Students who are disruptive or have outbursts are placed in “intervention.” They are taken, sometimes by force, to a room students call “the Hobbit,” where they sit in chairs. Some kids have reported being put in intervention for days, even months. The school maintains that a student is put in intervention for 30-minute “cooling off” periods. If they fail to cool off or remain disruptive, they may stay longer, under the watchful eye of a staff member.

Christina says she tried to steer clear of trouble while she was at Spring Creek, because she believed she was only biding her time until her mother came to get her.

While she wasn’t allowed to talk to her daughter, Janet was paying an additional $75 per week for Christina’s therapy sessions. Then, one day in late September, she received a call from a therapist at Spring Creek, a woman she had never met. The woman told Janet that after only her second session with Christina, she was convinced Christina was depressed. The therapist said she wanted to prescribe anti-depressants.

“They wanted me to put my daughter on anti-depressants without even letting me talk to her,” Janet says, disgusted at the memory. “Put her on drugs? That was the breaking point for me. I have read a lot about antidepressants in children and a lot of kids commit suicide while taking them. I didn’t even know who was prescribing these drugs. That was it for me.”

So Janet drove from southern California to Thompson Falls. Christina’s dad notified Spring Creek only hours before Janet got there, and when Janet arrived

Christina's things were boxed and waiting for her.

Unbeknownst to Janet or Christina, a mother from a community just a short drive from their California hometown was also on her way to Spring Creek. After hearing the news that Mexican authorities had raided and closed Casa by the Sea—an affiliated teen behavior modification facility located about 50 miles south of San Diego—that mother decided it was time to take her child out of the Spring Creek program. Her daughter was one of Christina's Family members.

On that day in early October 2004, Spring Creek lost two students, and with them about $80,000 per year in tuition and fees.

Three days later, the school lost another of Christina's Family members. Karlye Anne Newman, a 16-year-old girl from Denver, hanged herself in the bunkhouse that she'd shared with Christina only days earlier. She died just days before her 17th birthday.

"She just sort of disappeared"

Karlye Newman's death went largely unnoticed in Montana and elsewhere. No obituary ran in any of her hometown Colorado newspapers. While local newspapers were notified that there had been a suicide at the school, Karlye's name never appeared in print. The only record of her death is her Montana death certificate, which was filed on her birthday.

Her adoptive father died when she was about four years old, and his family wasn't told of Karlye's death until months later when a reporter called to ask about her.

"[Karlye] just sort of disappeared off the face of the earth. Isn't that sad?" says Nanci Shapiro, Karlye's aunt.

One mother told the Independent that shortly after she picked up her daughter from Spring Creek, she received a call from her daughter's "Family representative," who informed her there had been a death at the school, but that her daughter was safe with her Family.

The mother was confused, because her daughter was standing next to her in their California home at the time. A day

later, she received a second call. The woman again assured her that her child was safe.

“I was really glad I took [my daughter] out of there,” that mother says. “They obviously weren’t keeping track of the students.”

The Sanders County Sheriff’s Department investigated Karlye’s death and ruled it a suicide. There was no evidence of foul play. An investigator with the state Department of Justice interviewed Sanders County Sheriff Gene Arnold, as well as the medical examiners who examined Karlye’s body, and closed the case.

In a statement issued by the school, Spring Creek acknowledged that “SCLA [Spring Creek Lodge Academy] was acutely aware of the girl’s fragility and had placed her on ‘high risk’ observation. After showing signs of improvement, the 16-year-old student was recently removed from high risk after consultation with the student’s counselor, the assistant clinical director and four staff members who had worked closely with her.”

A student who knew Karlye (and other girls in her Family that had attempted suicide) said students on high risk are not allowed to possess sharp objects such as pens, they can’t wear their nametag lanyard and they are assigned a “high risk buddy” to watch out for them.

According to Spring Creek’s “Parent Orientation Handbook,” the school is “not recommended for students who are suicidal, psychotic, violent, assaultive, diabetic, schizophrenic, highly depressed and/or who have significant mental and emotional problems, drug addictions, or traumatic brain injury.”

“It gets really old in a hurry”

At first glance, Spring Creek Lodge looks like a first-class wilderness resort. It’s located on approximately 100 acres near the Clark Fork River, west of Thompson Falls. To get there, you have to drive down the long, winding and pot-holed Blue Slide Road for about 13 miles. The campus consists of log buildings with tin roofs situated among towering cedars, ponderosa pines and fir trees. Mountains provide a striking

backdrop for the campus, as well as an effective barrier to escape.

“The scenery is cool at first, but it gets really old in a hurry,” says one Spring Creek student.

The students don’t get visitors at all during their first few months at Spring Creek, and then parents are allowed to visit only after both parents and child have completed self-improvement “seminars.”

The kids come from all over the country, but nearly all share common characteristics: almost all are white, and almost all are from middle- to upper-class families. Some went to Spring Creek willingly; others were taken in the dead of night by a teen escort service.

“These two huge guys came into my bedroom at like four in the morning and told me to get dressed,” one of the boys recalls. “I didn’t know what was going on. My parents told me if I didn’t stop doing drugs they’d send me away but I didn’t really believe them.”

On a recent visit to Spring Creek Lodge, this Independent reporter was told he would be allowed to speak only to students selected by school administrators ahead of time, and who had received clearance from their parents to talk to the media. When the Independent declined to speak to pre-selected students, this reporter and a photographer were allowed to speak to a few randomly selected students of our choosing on the condition that we wouldn’t use their names or photograph their faces due to privacy concerns.

We had been told the students didn’t know we were coming, but the students we spoke to quickly relayed that they had been placed on “Cat-4 Silence” just minutes before we arrived at their classroom. We were told students were not allowed to speak while we were there and that talking could bring severe consequences.

We had been warned by a former Spring Creek student prior to our visit that we weren’t likely to find many students willing to talk openly about their experiences at Spring Creek, “unless you find someone who hates the program so much that they might risk everything to talk to you,” said a former student. “Most students are

scared. They're not just going to come out and talk to you. They have years and months to risk."

Mickey Manning, Spring Creek's principal, says the school's detractors should not be believed.

"The population you are speaking to is definitely a biased group that really fervently believes what they are saying," Manning says.

Manning maintains that parents and students who left Spring Creek and today denounce its practices are in denial about the problems in their own families.

"Part of it is to protect themselves from the pain of the reality of what they've gone through," says Manning. "As far as the kids are concerned, they are going to manipulate to the hills, because that's what these kids do."

"That's pretty much the program line," counters Dr. Roderick Hall, a San Diego-based clinical psychologist who specializes in child psychology. "You hear the exact same thing at all of the schools. They say the kids are liars and manipulators and they convince the parents that that's true."

Hall says parents and kids may see results from the type of behavior modification that takes place at facilities like Spring Creek, but in the long run, they do more harm than good.

"It's not therapy at all," says Hall. "I haven't heard anything that goes on in those facilities that has anything to do with therapy. It's more like scaring the heck out of them so that they fall in line. That will work, temporarily."

WWASPS, Hall says, catches parents "when they are vulnerable, desperate. They provide what looks like an easy solution. I think their facilities are nothing more than private prisons.

"What parents really need to do is, instead of going to the Internet to find help for their rebellious teen, is seek out a professional who has experience working with teens. Take the child. If the child won't go, then they should go by themselves. But parents need to talk to a social worker or therapist or counselor who has experience working with kids."

The students we spoke with at Spring Creek ranged in age from 14 to just shy of 18. They had been placed in the school for a variety of offenses. Some were constantly in trouble with the law. Most had been taking drugs of one kind or another. Nearly all were “disrespectful” of their parents and teachers. We weren’t allowed to roam the campus and freely and privately interview any student we wanted. We were taken to two specific classrooms wherefrom we chose a handful of students to go for a walk. One classroom was made up of “upper level” boys. These are students who are “working the program” and have advanced to higher levels.

The classroom was totally silent, but all eyes were immediately on us when we walked into the room. Nearly every hand in the room shot into the air when we asked if anyone wanted to go for a walk. In both classrooms, disappointed sighs and grumbles could be heard from the kids not called.

“We never get to go for walks,” said one girl. “If you even look out the window that’s considered ‘run plans’ and you get in trouble.”

The students said they are warned that escape is futile. They are told that the school has helicopters on stand-by, as well as dogs trained to run them down.

“They tell you, ‘Go ahead and try to run, see how far you get,’” said one student.

“The neighbors get a reward if they find one of us and turn us in. The furthest anybody ever got was to the end of that road,” said another student, pointing in the direction of Blue Slide Road.

When one student told us that our arrival was no surprise, a classmate dished a not-so-discrete elbow to the ribs. One student fidgeted with a nametag. Another’s hands were pulled deep into the sleeves of the school-issued sweatshirt. Most never took their hands out of their pockets.

The students said they knew we were coming because they had been forced to clean the campus and their bunk houses to prepare for our arrival.

The students told us they aren’t allowed to so much as look at members of the opposite sex.

“I wasn’t afraid of boys when I came in here, but I’m afraid I will be when I leave,” one girl said.

“The students are here to focus on themselves,” program director Mike Chisholm had explained earlier. “We don’t want to encourage romantic issues.”

Another student said her mother gave her a choice of programs in which to enroll. She said she picked Spring Creek Lodge because it looked like a nice place. She says she was never told that she wouldn’t get to go for walks, talk to boys or call her mother.

Still, all the students said they would rather be at Spring Creek Lodge than at Tranquility Bay, an affiliated facility in Jamaica. Although students say it is forbidden to talk about what goes on at Tranquility, word gets around. Sometimes a student who has been transferred from Tranquility Bay will relate his or her experience about the school there. The students know Tranquility Bay exists, and they know they don’t want to go there.

Just as they are not allowed to talk about Tranquility Bay, they face severe consequences if they talk about Karlye Newman’s death.

“That’s a Cat-4. We can’t talk about Karlye,” we were told.

The consequence of a Cat-4 infraction, according to the card around the students’ necks, is that a student drops three levels in the program, which translates into several additional months of confinement at Spring Creek, and thousands more dollars owed by their parents.

“A real dark time”

Spring Creek Lodge is the largest of eight facilities affiliated with the WWASPS, based in Utah. The facilities are located across the United States, plus Tranquility Bay in Jamaica. The programs are independently owned, but all are WWASPS members, and all adhere to WWASPS’ point-system behavior modification program.

For WWASPS and Spring Creek Lodge, Karlye’s death was more bad news at a time when WWASPS facilities were

already under fire for a string of allegations, including misconduct, abuse and neglect.

Last month, students at Ivy Ridge Academy, a WWASPS facility in Ogdensburg, N.Y., rioted. The melee resulted in the expulsion of 48 students and drew the attention of state authorities. Additionally, The New York Times reported that state police are investigating two unrelated cases involving allegations of child abuse at Ivy Ridge.

Shortly before Karlye Newman hanged herself, Mexican authorities raided a WWASPS facility in Mexico called Casa by the Sea, following allegations of abuse and misconduct there.

The facility was shut down and its charges were either sent home or to one of the remaining WWASPS facilities. According to current and former Spring Creek students, the Thompson Falls school saw an influx of new students in the month prior to Karlye's death. They told the Independent that most of the new students came from Casa by the Sea.

"She was missed on a head count," said one student, explaining how Karlye, having only recently been taken off "high risk" after a previous suicide attempt, could have been left alone long enough to hang herself by a shirt in her cabin's bathroom.

Chaffin Pullan, the school's director, says the influx of students from Casa by the Sea didn't overburden the school and had nothing to do with Karlye's death.

According to several sources who were close to members of Karlye Newman's Spring Creek "Family," there had been at least four suicide attempts at Spring Creek in the month leading up to Karlye's death, including a previous hanging attempt by Karlye. One girl overdosed on Tylenol and tried to cut herself with pen caps and a metal clip attached to her identification card. Another girl tried to suffocate herself with a pillow.

Pullan said the girl who overdosed was immediately taken to the hospital and cleared by doctors, who said she wasn't a suicide risk. The father of the girl who tried to smother herself said she was

“going through a real dark time.” He added that his daughter is better off for having gone to Spring Creek (she’s now back home), but that he has serious reservations about the credentials of the 230 staff members overseeing the children there.

Spring Creek admits that it is not a treatment facility and that “staff are hired not necessarily by credentials but to carry out the outlined programs specifically designed to benefit students at Spring Creek Lodge.”

Earlier this month, 26 plaintiffs filed a lawsuit in a California court against WWASPS and its associated facilities, including Spring Creek. According to the 92-page complaint filed by California attorneys Edward Masry (of Erin Brockovich fame) and Henry Bushkin, Spring Creek is accused of negligence, negligent child abuse, breach of contract, fraud, assault and battery, false imprisonment, intentional inflection of emotional distress, negligent medical care, breach of fiduciary duty and conspiracy to commit breach of contract.

One of the plaintiffs, former Spring Creek student Gregory Gomez, alleges he was subjected to threats, intimidation, invasion of privacy, mental abuse and random punishment. The complaint states that Gomez’s mother was led to believe her son was benefiting from his experience at Spring Creek while he was being abused. Gomez also alleges he suffered bodily injury at the hands of Spring Creek staff members and was cut off from outside contact, thus unable to report the abuse.

Spring Creek officials would not comment on the case other than to say that they have not yet seen the lawsuit, which was filed May 27 in Los Angeles Superior Court.

Similar allegations of abuse surfaced in court last August when the father of a former Spring Creek student testified about the abuse he says his son suffered at the school.

The father testified that his son spent about eight and a half months locked in Spring Creek’s “intervention room.” John France testified that his son, also named John France, told him he was kept in the room 24 hours a day. He

said his son was let out during the daytime only to use the bathroom, and if he had to urinate at night, he did it in his water glass. France said his son was assaulted by other students who were sometimes put in the room with him.

Chaffin Pullan denies those claims. He says France was under constant supervision.

“Our biggest mistake was not sending John France home earlier,” says Pullan.

France alleges his son had to have plastic surgery to repair the roof of his mouth and two front teeth after an injury he says occurred at Spring Creek Lodge. He testified that his son was burned by a heater while being restrained by Spring Creek staff, and injured from a fall down a flight of stairs.

Bernadette Cabrael, testifying in the same lawsuit, said that while her daughter was enrolled in a WWASPS facility in South Carolina, she was hospitalized twice without Bernadette’s knowledge.

According to officials at the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), their office has received many calls over the years from concerned parents questioning the safety and effectiveness of various therapeutic and behavior modification programs in Montana.

“Any kind of a situation where you have children, especially vulnerable children or troubled children like those that go to these programs, we think there needs to be safeguards to make sure that those kids are being treated safely,” says Gayle Shirley, a spokeswoman for DPHHS. “For at least the past one and a half years we’ve been looking into how we might be able to create some sort of oversight.”

“Often misunderstood”

Teen behavior modification, therapeutic schools and wilderness therapy programs are big business in Western Montana. An estimated 1,200 children are enrolled in them. Some smaller programs charge nearly double Spring Creek’s monthly tuition of approximately $3,500. Spring Creek alone grosses close to $20 million annually, and a Spring Creek lobbyist claimed during the last legislative session that the

industry generates revenues in excess of $40 million annually in Montana.

Yet most Montanans don't even know what's going on in their own back yard.

Montana's rugged, rural geography is part of the reason for the booming success of teen programs in the state, providing for a plentitude of "back to nature" wilderness experiences, as well as making it difficult for teens to escape. Another reason dates back to Spring Creek's original beginnings in the 1970s, when founder Steve Cawdrey bought the original 80 acres along Blue Slide Road northwest of Thompson Falls with visions of creating a new educational experience. The school, called Spring Creek Community, was the first of its kind in the area and stressed an outdoor adventure model of education. Over the years the school grew to become part residential boarding school, part outdoor adventure program and part character-building and self-improvement camp. Many of the smaller teen programs that exist today in Western Montana are run by former employees and colleagues of Cawdrey's.

A third reason is that in Montana, private programs that do not receive state funds are not required to register with the state, and the state has no authority to license or regulate them. In other words, there's no federal or state oversight of programs responsible for the care of roughly 1,200 children in approximately 35 facilities located throughout the state. More than a third of those kids are at Spring Creek Lodge.

Many in the industry agree that some form of licensure is needed. The industry supports the idea for two main reasons: licensure gives the programs credibility, and it provides for some state oversight and protection of the children in the industry's care.

What the industry is overwhelmingly opposed to is having what its representatives call a "medical model" shoved down its throat.

Senate Bill 101, drafted by DPHHS and carried by state Sen. Trudi Schmidt, D-Great Falls, in the last session, called for registration of all teen programs in Montana. The bill required DPHHS to appoint a working group to develop and

present recommendations to an interim DPHHS committee and to report to the Legislature regarding proposed legislation for 2007 that would require licensure. That bill died in the House with industry representatives battling hard against it. Spring Creek Lodge alone registered five lobbyists for the 2005 session, and by their own account spent more than $50,000 on lobbying.

State Rep. Paul Clark, D-Trout Creek, owner and operator of his own teen program called Galena Ridge Academy, called on industry representatives to work on an alternative bill to SB 101. What resulted was House Bill 628. The difference between the two bills is that SB 101 put oversight in the hands of DPHHS and HB 628 puts oversight in the hands of the state Department of Labor and Industry and creates a five-member, governor-appointed board to explore appropriate regulation of the industry. The board, not yet seated, will consist of two citizens and three representatives of the industry.

Representatives of teen programs feel they are best qualified to determine the breadth and scope of any future regulation. They fear that government bureaucrats do not possess the expertise or knowledge to impose effective and responsible legislation. They say that if left in the hands of DPHHS, unnecessary rules and regulations could stifle creative and effective therapeutic techniques.

That fear is not unjustified, says Lon Woodbury, of the Woodbury Reports website. Woodbury is one of the nation's top educational consultants and an expert on the teen help industry.

"In some states regulations have been destructive," says Woodbury. "They can put unnecessary restrictions and requirements on a very effective and safe program."

The teen behavior modification industry is "often misunderstood," says Jan Moss, executive director of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (NATSAP). "People tend to view it as more of a clinical or medical model. That's sort of at the extreme of what we do. We want to make sure that the regulations and laws put into place fit what we do."

The future of teen programs and the level and scope of state regulation is a battle that will continue into the 2007 legislative session. Proponents of teen therapeutic and wilderness programs will push for self-regulation and licensure. Groups like the Coalition Against Institutionalized Child Abuse (CAICA) and the International Survivors Action Committee (ISAC) are working on community awareness and outreach to educate parents, legislators, and legal and health professionals on the tactics used by teen programs.

Sen. Trudi Schmidt now sits on the board of directors for the newly formed CAICA.

“I got involved because of the overall concern that I had about what was going on in these places,” says Schmidt.

Schmidt says she’s received e-mails from parents from around the country asking her what the state is doing to regulate teen programs in Montana.

According to Woodbury, the demand for these types of programs is still growing. There seems to be no shortage of parents willing to spend tens of thousands of dollars to send their kids away in order to shape them up. In an article published on his website, www.strugglingteens.com, Woodbury states that new private residential and wilderness programs are popping up all over the country, suggesting that “a number of astute people have analyzed the market and concluded that the potential in this market is sufficient to take the major risk of undertaking the very difficult task of creating a new private residential program for high-risk teens.”

By all accounts, the teen help industry is lucrative and booming. The question for Montana lawmakers is: how much oversight of this lucrative enterprise does the state want to take on?

“We want to make sure that the right people are appointed to this new board,” says Sen. Schmidt. “We’ll have to wait and see if this new piece of legislation will give the state the kind of oversight it needs. It all depends on who ends up on that board.”

“Very dubious”

Programs that rely on “scare tactics” to prevent children and adolescents from engaging in violent behavior are not only ineffective, but may actually make the problem worse, according to a National Institutes of Health state-of-the-science panel convened last fall.

One of the major challenges facing parents, regulators and legislators when defining which programs are safe and effective is the lack of comparison tools at their disposal. The schools in Montana run the gamut from short-term wilderness therapy programs to long-term residential programs. Some are “tough-love” behavior modification programs, others are small mom-and-pop operations that teach children responsibility by allowing them to make decisions for themselves.

One of the things that the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs has done is develop a firm set of ethical guidelines and best-practice standards under which its members must operate. That includes reporting to NATSAP information on academic accreditation, financial affiliations, admission policies (including applicant screening), employee background check policies, etc.

Not all programs in the state ascribe to the same standards; therefore Montana programs have recently formed the Montana Adolescent Alternative Private Programs Association, or MAAPP, to develop similar guidelines for their schools.

“[MAAPP] is a venue for programs to get together and look at standards that need to be in licensing structure,” says Rep. Clark. “It’s a venue where programs can present their research to the board and say, ‘Here we are and this is what we think is essential.’”

The association’s members will look to NATSAP’s guidelines to help them develop their own set of best practices for Montana programs.

Fewer than half of the teen programs in Montana are currently members of NATSAP. No WWASPS facility has ever been a member, nor has any applied for NATSAP membership.

One of NATSAP’s key ethical guidelines, shared by the Independent Educational Consultants Association

(IECA)—a nationwide network of professional educational consultants who help parents place their children in teen programs—deals with referral fees or “finder’s fees.” Teen programs in the NATSAP association are forbidden from paying finders fees to educational consultants, and any educational consultant or firm found to have accepted referral fees from programs loses IECA membership.

“That kind of exchanging cash corrupts the whole system,” says Woodbury.

Reputable educational consultants usually require a battery of tests and interviews with prospective clients to determine the nature and extent of the teen’s problems. The consultant will then recommend programs based on the child’s needs and the expertise or specialty of the program.

Woodbury sends out a survey every year to educational consultants nationwide asking them to rate teen programs across the nation in terms of whether they would refer children there. Only schools earning top marks are included in “Places for Struggling Teens,” the directory Woodbury publishes. He says WWASPS programs consistently score poorly in his survey, and in recent years their numbers have hit rock bottom. One of the main reasons for that, says Woodbury, is WWASPS’ practice of encouraging parents to refer other families to the program in exchange for free tuition or cash.

“[WAWASPS programs] are not thought well of in the industry,” says Woodbury. “They are seen as very dubious.”

“Definitely an eye opener”

Christina recently celebrated her 18th birthday with her family back home in California. If her mother hadn’t pulled her out of Spring Creek Lodge, she would have celebrated her birthday by “taking her exit plan.” Some students of Spring Creek, whether they have graduated the program or not, leave come their 18th birthday. If their parents don’t want them back, they try to find a ride to Missoula or Coeur D’Alene or Spokane.

Sometimes they end up at Missoula’s Poverello Center, where they stay just long enough to get in touch with a friend

or a relative willing to send them a plane or bus ticket back to wherever they came from, says the Pov's George Scherger.

Christina recognizes why her parents sent her to Spring Creek, and deep down, she says, she doesn't hold it against them. She says she learned a lot from her experience, but not what Spring Creek wanted her to learn.

"Yeah, it was definitely an eye opener. I learned a lot through a bad experience. I learned that I could be a lot worse off. I could be like the kids still stuck in Spring Creek."

Today, nine months since she was sent off to Montana, Christina says she's trying to avoid the kinds of behavior that drove her parents' to desperation. She admits that she still sneaks a cigarette now and then (mostly on her breaks at work), and she's not going to promise that she will never drink as a minor. She'll have to work hard over the summer to earn her diploma. She'll have to work even harder to fully earn back her parents' trust. But in both cases, Christina says she's determined to succeed.

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"I think it put her in a bad situation," says Janet, acknowledging that she regrets sending Christina to Spring Creek. "I don't know if it's going to permanently bother her or not. I mean, that poor girl killed herself."

Janet knows her daughter remains defiant, and it will be a challenge to keep her on the right path, but she's hopeful, and glad to have her daughter back home where she belongs.

"She just might pull through. We'll just keep our fingers crossed."

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