The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20080905093055/http://www.wwaspsinfo.net/carolina/c…

Carolina Springs Academy teaches kids to respect authority and follow the rules. So why did two state agencies need to sue to force it to get licensed and follow state regulations?

The Free Times

by Scott Shackford

Two stories from Carolina Springs Academy:

From an interview: Cara, 16, from Aurora Ill., was involved with drugs. "I was defiant to my parents," she said. "We had some really bad fights." Her father brought her to Carolina Springs Academy nine months ago (tricking her by telling her he was bringing her on a business trip).

She said the school helped her get back on track and learn to make better decisions. She hasn't done any drugs or smoked cigarettes since she's been in the program. She'll be going home to visit family for Christmas. It's only the second time she's been home during her stay at the academy. She'll be graduating from the program early next year and plans to return home to study photography at a community college there.

From a staff report from the South Carolina Department of Social Services in October from an interview with two boys who had run away from the facility: "He has been at CSA for 1 1/2 months. He was placed at CSA after being discharged from a psychiatric hospital in [location deleted]. He was in the psychiatric hospital twice for possibly being suicidal and for being assaultive. He said he was told that he was going to a place where they would provide therapy by a trained staff (counselors, etc.). He said CSA has no professional staff. He said he ran away because he doesn't want to be there.

"He saw Dr. McCord and "Miss Becky" for the first time since he was placed. He said he is on Risperdal and Paxil. He said the residents have to ask permission to eat, stand up, sit down, take a drink. He said they are not allowed to talk while eating... He said the toilets do not have doors or shower curtains, and the plumbing doesn't work well--there's no water pressure.

"He said after running away and coming back, he had an anxiety attack. They would not give them anything for that. He said they are on restriction for running away, and they have to get up every night at 3:00 a.m. for a week and walk around the field for 1 1/2 hours. He said two other boys ran and the rest of the children had to get up at 4:00 a.m. and stay up until they came back at 9:00 p.m.

"He said for four days he had to sleep on a mattress in the cafeteria because he was on isolation. His parents came to check on him and he couldn't see them... His mattress was put back on his bed the day his parents came... He said the staff has taken everyone's shoes. The children had on flip-flops and socks.

"He told of a child that compared this facility to George Orwell's book, 1984, and lost 2000 points and was demoted from level 3 to level 1. He said in the seminars the staff tell you your only friends are the staff and they twist your thinking. He said they deprive you of all your freedoms."

On the fringes of the small town of Due West, located on the fringes of Abbeville, is a small school by the name of Carolina Springs Academy. Carolina Springs Academy is a school for troubled teenagers, or "defiant teens" as some of their marketing likes to describe them. The kids found at the school were sent there by their parents because they didn't know what else to do with them.

The school is one of those "tough love" academies that came into vogue during the '80s as the children of baby boomers began reaching their teen years and began acting up. Although different from a military school, schools like Carolina Springs Academy operate under strict regimented routines where students earn privileges by complying with school rules and lose privileges for disobeying them.

The World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP), an umbrella group that promotes seven of these type of facilities, markets Carolina Springs Academy with the statement, "Carolina Springs Academy is an innovative and effective program for teens who are struggling in their home, school, or community: it teaches values, integrity, honor, and respect for authority. It helps these teens become an asset to the community."

Ironically, Carolina Springs Academy has been getting into trouble for the past year. Two state agencies, the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) have been taking legal action against the school. According to the agencies, Carolina Springs Academy has not shown much respect for the state's authority to monitor the school's behavior and require certain operational changes.

A Checkered Past

Narvin Lichfield started Carolina Springs Academy in the fall of 1998 as a sister to a school his family owned in Utah. The majority of the school's first students were brought in from the Morava Academy in the Czech Republic, an academy formerly associated with the network of schools. The reason the students were transferred to Carolina Springs Academy is because Czech authorities closed the Morava Academy and charged the facility's operators with abusing the children there. Supporters of the facility argued that the police had been manipulated by a disgruntled ex-employee and some students who lied in order to attempt to get out of the program.

DSS representatives first examined Carolina Springs Academy in December of 1998 to find out some information about when the school would submit applications to be licensed as a residential treatment care facility. According to DSS's reports, then-Director Richard Byars told them that Carolina Springs Academy was a boarding school, not a treatment facility, and was not required to be licensed by DSS. The school was already in operation, though it had not yet received accreditation (The school had submitted an application to an accreditation organization located in the Northwest U.S.). DSS filed for an injunction to stop the facility from operating until it was in compliance with state law at the end of December. A judge refused the injunction at that time, but required Carolina Springs Academy to come into compliance with state regulations by January 15.

Over the course of several months DSS made multiple trips and interviewed several students at the school. Some of the problems they uncovered included:

- **Inadequate information in students' records that failed to describe their history and any problems they may have.**
- **Children were not being given prescribed medication for emotional problems such as bipolar disorder and depression. Byars told DSS representatives that he allowed children to stop taking medications if they felt they didn't need them.**
- **Staff members were using restraints on troublesome children without proper training. One girl said that children were handcuffed to their beds for disciplinary purposes.**
- **A psychologist DSS had been told was treating the children had never been to the facility.**
- **After a representative from DHEC told Byars the buildings weren't up to standards and if he didn't fix them, DHEC would close the school, Byars forced some of the older boys in the program to stay up until 3 or 4 a.m. working to fix the buildings with power tools.**

- **Children were told that if they caused too much trouble they would be sent to one of the related facilities overseas in Jamaica or Samoa where the program was much tougher. Some alleged that if they mentioned any physical, sexual or emotional abuse that occurred in Carolina Springs Academy they would also be shipped overseas.**

- **One student alleged that staff members at the facility forcibly removed a girl's belly button ring with a pair of pliers.**

- **Much of the staff had little or no education or experience dealing with troubled children. Byars himself had no college degree.**

- **"Junior Staff" (students who had achieved a certain level in the program) were involved in the discipline of other children. Students had also been involved in the strip searching of other students.**

- **A child threatening suicide was handcuffed and bound and gagged with duct tape.**

- **Inadequate sewage systems and physical space for the number of students they planned to deal with.**

In April, (after several extensions of the time allowed for compliance) DSS informed Carolina Springs Academy that they would have to make some changes if they wanted to remain open. As part of a court order that would allow the facility's licensing, DSS determined Byars to be unqualified to be the school's director and soon afterwards he was dismissed. Physical problems with the structure of the school would be repaired. Any building for housing children must be approved by DHEC, DSS and the local fire marshal. Children would no longer be permitted to perform staff functions.

A couple of structural changes in the program were also required. DSS required that children be allowed to attend off-campus activities at least twice per month, regardless of how far they've progressed in the program. Prior to the change, students needed to reach a certain stage in order to attend off-campus events. DSS also required that students be allowed more opportunities to call parents in privacy and that the academy stop reading the contents of students' mail before forwarding it to parents.

After several other checks and analyses of the facility, Carolina Springs Academy was finally licensed as a "child caring institution" by DSS on October 29, nearly a year after DSS first got involved with the school.

But by that time, DHEC had begun taking a closer look at the facility and also pursued an injunction to force it to close because it was not appropriately licensed. DHEC also fined the facility $5,000 in March for operating without a license. As with DSS, DHEC contends that Carolina Springs Academy is a residential treatment facility and therefore falls under certain licensing requirements. DHEC's actions are still under consideration as it analyzes the facility to make a final determination of whether it's a boarding school or a treatment facility. A finding is expected in mid-January.

War of Semantics

Current Carolina Springs Academy Director Elaine Davis believes that a lot of the conflict resulted from some confusion when the school was being founded about what sort of facility it would be.

"Mr. Lichfield had talked to some people and [he] was told they didn't have to be licensed by the state in order to run a boarding school," she said. There is a spectrum of facilities that serve the needs of troubled children that run from simple motivational institutions to full blown treatment centers for drug use and emotional problems. Davis said Carolina Springs Academy falls on the lower end of the spectrum.

"We deal mostly with a lot of conduct disorder," she said. "They start failing in school. Parents feel like they've got to save that child's life and education with behavior management." She said that students determined to have more serious psychiatric or medical problems are referred to their WWASP schools that do offer professional treatment in those areas.

However, according to DHEC's records and their claims in the lawsuit, the original plans for Carolina Springs Academy did include a designation as a residential treatment facility. In September of 1998 a lawyer for Lichfield contacted DHEC requesting information about the development of a residential treatment facility in South Carolina in a different location. DHEC informed them that the school did need to go through a review and licensure proceeding to operate in South Carolina. Furthermore, DHEC informed them that a state health plan from 1997 was used to project needs for future beds and facilities. According to their projections, South Carolina had no need for additional facilities, and due to the nature of the plan, would not be permitted to license the facility in South Carolina at all.

In order to prevent the designation of being a residential treatment facility, Carolina Springs Academy does not have any licensed medical experts, psychologists or psychiatrists on their staff. Outside therapists and counselors are brought in at the parents' expense and approval in order to treat any problems the children may have in those areas. Medication is dispensed through a specialized service because without a license, the school is not permitted to dispense it themselves.

So, how exactly does a school treat students with behavioral problems without actually providing any of the psychological and emotional treatments that would require them to be subjected to state oversight? Besides the regimented schedule and system of punishment and rewards, the school also has students watch "emotional videos"--videos on issues like drug abuse, racism, self-esteem and other areas intended to help student's emotional growth.

But the primary avenue of behavior modification is through a program called TASKS (short for Teen Accountability, Self-Esteem and Keys to Success). TASKS is a series of seminars and workshops for teens and their parents designed to "work on such specific issues as: accountability, honesty, integrity, trust, choices, responsibility, anger and especially self-esteem." But the make-up of these seminars has been a source of criticism against the WWASP's collection of schools--including accusations that the schools are subjecting families to "brainwashing" techniques.

School or Cult?

The TASKS seminars are conducted by outside facilitators for Carolina Springs Academy. The secretive seminars use a system of exercises, lectures and confessionals in an attempt to help individuals recognize what about themselves is "not working" and change their behavior.

That's how the promoters of the seminars and those who support them describe it. The seminars, however, have a very unusual and somewhat cloudy history. The seminar techniques are an off-shoot of a form of personal and business motivation seminars commonly referred to as "est" (an acronym for the organization founding the technique). Est has been a controversial motivation system, and participants have tended to come out either feeling as though they've been emotionally renewed or psychologically scarred.

Participants are required to take a vow of secrecy not to reveal the details of what happens in these seminars. According to a DSS report, Byars refused to even explain to them what happened in the students' seminars.

Critics, however, aren't so silent. In July, Lou Kilzner of the Denver Rocky Mountain News wrote a multi-part investigation of the schools within the WWASP program. He spoke with Margaret Singer, a psychologist who specializes in mind control. She has documented the history of these types of programs which trace their origins back to foundations of Communist China as a tool to convert citizens to their beliefs. The techniques were believed to have been used on American prisoners during the Korean War.

In America, the technique drifted into use in personal motivational seminars beginning in the '60s. In these seminars, the facilitator uses what critics define as "coercive influence" to create a sort of group-think mentality. Conformity is enforced through a series of verbal rewards and participants are expected to reveal their darkest personal secrets. Those who don't conform or question the facilitator is faced with

withering criticism or what some say is verbal intimidation. As Singer described it, the system creates an "us versus them" mentality. Nonconforming participants are separated from the rest of the group. The rest of the group then cooperates with the facilitator in pressuring the defiant members by suggesting that there is something wrong with them for failing to comply with the rest of the group.

This is exactly the experience that parents Karen E. Lile and Kendall Ross Bean described in their account of attending one of the parent seminars. After an experience they both found extremely abusive, the decided to break the silence and post the details of their experience on the web. Lile said the facilitator and other participants of the seminar ganged up on her and tried to make her feel as though she was a failure because she refused to give in to the facilitators intimidation techniques. She said the facilitator told uncooperative members that they disgusted him and that they were failures and told them that they should trust those who said negative things about they. She left the 3-day seminar in the middle of an exercise where people were put into groups and barraged with negative statements by others in the program.

These kinds of behavior modification techniques have been used in cults, though school operators and owners say these techniques are not intended to create a cult. And many say the experience wasn't negative.

"I can only speak for my experiences," said Mary Walker, assistant academic coordinator for Carolina Springs Academy. "I had a wonderful experience. It was kind of eye-opening for me." Staff members also often go through the TASKS seminars.

Vinnie, a 16-year-old student in the program, also felt the seminars were very helpful to his recovery. Vinnie had gotten involved in drugs and alcohol and his bad temper had gotten him into a lot of bad fights and violent actions.

"You get a lot of feedback," he said. "You learn things about yourself. [I learned] that it's not like another person can get you mad. You choose to be mad."

Students can refuse to participate in the seminars. However, according to the school's point system of earning privileges, a student can only make it halfway through the program if they don't complete any of the TASKS seminars. Davis said that as director she is allowed to enter and leave the seminars as she chooses. If she sees any abusive behavior she is allowed to stop the seminars. She said she hasn't felt the need to do so, though she did once ask a facilitator to change certain behaviors and the facilitator complied.

Even if the schools under WWASP's umbrellas are not part of a cult, WWASP has a rather cult-like mentality in dealing with criticism. Information kits sent out in response to media requests include a cover letter dismissing negative stories from the press as taking the word of a handful of critics and not talking to enough of their happy parents. The letter demands that any reporter put the story into "the proper perspective" (in other words, their perspective) and brings up the possibility of lawsuits against media outlets that have reported negative things about the schools. In addition to the Denver Rocky Mountain News, Dateline NBC, Forbes magazine and People have done reports on problems with the schools. Some parents have filed suit against People claiming that their story made them look like negligent parents for sending their child to one of the schools.

The letter also dismisses critics of the programs as being influenced by "radical child advocacy agendas" or as parents in bitter divorce struggles using the school as a point in their personal disagreements. It also speaks directly to Lile and Bean's experiences (though not by name) by saying they have "major insecurities" and are "on a crusade."

The kit includes a survey that is intended to prove that parents are happy with the school. Reporters are told, "This type of perspective needs to be reported." The study reports that of 99 families surveyed, 96.5 percent would recommend it to other parents and 98.7 percent say they made a good choice. However, the

survey was put together and sent out by WWASP and contains no indication that a third party or independent polling group has monitored it to make certain the results were accurate.

Working the Programs

Here in Columbia, Ann Carol Price and R. Grant Price operate The Price Group, a consulting organization that helps parents choose specialty schools for their children. About half of the 250 children they deal with per year are troubled children who are having difficulty in a traditional school system.

Ann and Grant are a mother-son team with a lot of experience dealing with "therapeutic schools"--schools that work with emotionally-troubled students. Grant himself is a product of a therapeutic school.

Although the two of them deal with around 50 different therapeutic schools, neither have them have recommended any of WWASP's schools for the past four years. Neither Ann nor Grant could detail any specifics about why they hadn't recommended the schools, but both said they choose schools they've had the best professional experiences with and they felt were the best matches for the children.

At The Price Group, a team of four psychologists work with parents and children for a week, interviewing and analyzing them before a school is recommended. This pre-screening is important, they say, because, though many children seem to be making the same bad choices--drugs, violence, sex--each child has his or her own reasons and the right school is the one that can address those reasons.

"All these phone calls are remarkably similar," said Grant. "But you discover a lot of differences through the understanding of the child. You have to determine who [each school] serves best." Sometimes The Price Group even determines that a therapeutic school isn't necessarily the best choice for the child.

According to Davis, the WWASP schools don't have a very in-depth pre-screening process. In fact, she said before she took over as director children were accepted at Carolina Springs Academy with few questions asked. Only when they got there were the child's problems explored, and that caused some early problems at the school. Because the school's model is not designed to provide psychiatric or medical services, some of the children with more intense emotional problems needed to be moved to other schools with a licensed staff.

Now Davis says she calls parents who send in applications to put their students in Carolina Springs Academy. Based on her conversation with the parents, she may recommend one of the other schools of the WWASP program.

Grant said that though he hasn't done a lot of analysis of the WWASP schools, he has heard from other professionals in the field who have concerns about WWASP's system of marketing the program. Two organizations exist, titled Adolescent Services Inc. and Teen Help, that offer parents assistance in getting troubled children into specialty programs. Although seemingly independent, the two programs recommend primarily the schools under WWASP's umbrella. In addition parents in the program get tuition discounts (Carolina Springs Academy costs $2,690 per month) if they convince other parents to send children to the program and parents get discounts if they send more than one of their children to the schools. Lichfield has made television appearances on places such as The Jenny Jones Show to promote the school and they allow media interviews of the children.

"It's a little bit unorthodox that they allow the interviews," Grant said. "Parents recruiting parents--It's not illegal, but it skirts the edges of a 'safe harbor' system. We operate independently of the schools and don't receive payment from any of them for recommendations."

Ann added that though they receive visits from representatives from therapeutic schools across the country in order to discuss their school with them, she hadn't been contacted or approached by Carolina Springs Academy. At Carolina Springs Academy, a board in Davis' office detailed six incoming students. All were recommended to the school by either Teen Help or Adolescent Services Inc.

Regaining Trust

Since Davis has taken over as director of Carolina Springs Academy, she said she's been working to make the school more cooperative with the state and also make connections with the surrounding community. A source at DHEC did say that the school has been much more approachable and cooperative since Davis took over.

Davis dismissed the staff member who forced the boy who had run away to stay up walking all night and put him in isolation for a week. She said she also dismissed a staff member who had touched a child in an angry manner (though she said the staff member didn't actually strike the child). She said she runs the school as a more "open" facility and allows people in the community to come and tour the school so they can see that it's not a prison and the children aren't being abused.

The school has officially also received accreditation from Northwest and Davis said she's working on getting the school accredited with a program in this region. A school nearby the facility refused to accept credits from courses of a student in Carolina Springs Academy.

Davis places a lot of the blame for the initial problems with the school on Byars, and oddly, it doesn't bother him. Despite being forced out as director of the school, he feels the decision was made so that the school could remain in operation and doesn't take it personally, even though he says the school still owes him back pay.

"I did nothing that I wasn't told to do by Narvin Lichfield," he said. Interestingly, he's still defiant about complying with DSS regulations.

"Because I was standing up to DSS and basically not doing as they asked me to do, somebody had to be a sacrificial lamb," he said. "We came into South Carolina with the understanding that we didn't need to be licensed. They started flexing their muscles and said we're going to do what they say."

Carolina Springs Academy also has an ally in Charleston Senator Ernest Passailaigue. Passailaigue's son is currently in one of the other WWASP schools. When he heard of Carolina Springs Academy's difficulties he contacted DSS Director Elizabeth Patterson to explain how the school had helped his son. He said, however, he was not attempting to influence DSS's decision to license the school.

For parents who may be considering putting their child in a therapeutic school, Ann and Grant recommended looking for a third party independent of a particular institution that will look over a variety different schools. Of, course, because that's what they do for a living, Grant added the rejoinder that they don't necessarily have to come to them, but they should look very carefully before choosing a program.

"If you end up in the wrong program, it could take you six months to figure it out, your kid will have another failure under his or her belt and you'll be out a lot of money," Grant said.



[Return to Carolina Springs Page]