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Can Wilderness Camps Kill Your Kid?

MONDAY, JUNE 22, 2009

filed under: [family](#)

It's an industry that preys on desperation.

If your teenager has emotional issues, abuses drugs, or is promiscuous, help is just a phone call away. Wilderness intervention programs promise to "fix" bad behavior by teaching your child life skills and building self-esteem. These facilities offer a beacon of hope for [parents](#) like Crystal Manganaro, who sent her son, Matthew, to a wilderness camp outside of Houston. But what Crystal didn't realize was that the camp she entrusted with her son's life would so carelessly take it away.



Troubled Teen

At the age of 14, Matthew Meyer was flunking out of school and became a social outcast. "We argued about everything," says Crystal. Doctors diagnosed him with a **bipolar disorder**, but medication and weekly counseling didn't work. His [mother](#) had reached the breaking point. Her only son's belligerent behavior was uncontrollable. "I felt like he'd be isolated from the rest of the world socially and would end up living with me for the rest of his life." Crystal believed she had no choice but to seek professional help. She, along with thousands of parents in similar situations, turned to a wilderness intervention program because "I thought that was the answer."

In September 2004, Matthew's parents drove him hours away to a facility known as Lone Star Expeditions, located in the Davey Crockett National Forest in Texas. Stranded in an unfamiliar environment, Matthew was subjected to forced hikes while carrying a heavy backpack in hot weather.

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Communication with family was limited to several e-mails. "You have no way of knowing how it's going," said Crystal, who had no idea about her son's torturous treatment until it was too late.

Tragic Death

Just eight days into the program, Matthew and his group hiked several miles in 90-degree weather. A combination of excessive heat, a constrictive uniform, and Matthew's obesity caused him to overheat. He suffered a condition called **hyperthermia**, the worst form of heatstroke. "His body was literally burning up from the inside," says Crystal.

But instead of taking the boy's situation seriously, inexperienced and indifferent staffers thought Matthew was joking. They ignored his complaints of numbness in his legs. They told him he was having an anxiety attack when he suffered shortness of breath. Then they dumped water on him after he vomited and collapsed on the ground. Matthew Meyer died an hour later at the hospital. He was 14 years old.

Camp administrators refused to tell Crystal what happened to her son. It took three and a half years of investigation and litigation to reveal the truth. Aspen Education Group, the owners of Lone Star Expeditions, settled the case out of court.

The California-based company provided a written response to momlogic: "Safety is paramount within each of our outdoor programs, therefore each group is supported by a professionally trained wilderness first responder. In addition, all direct care staff are First Aid and CPR certified," wrote Kristen Hayes, Communications Director, adding, "Outdoor behavior health programs provide struggling young people with a wilderness-based experience, far removed from their current temptations, distractions and negative influences. Therapists, counselors and nature enable each student to accept responsibility for personal decisions, address individual and family issues, and become invested in their own personal growth."

An Industry that Operates Under the Radar

Nationwide, there are hundreds of wilderness programs, **boot camps**, and residential treatment facilities that practice a "tough love" approach to modifying children's behavior. This billion-dollar industry operates under the radar, without government oversight or intervention. "There are a number of gaps in federal and state oversight," said Kay Brown, director of the Government Accountability Office's Education, Workforce, and Income Securities Team, the federal agency that investigated Matthew Meyer's death.

The GAO recently released a series of scathing reports detailing its concerns regarding **abuse** and death in certain programs for troubled teens. The agency found thousands of allegations of abuse and, in some cases, death in American-owned and American-operated facilities at home and abroad between 1990 and 2007. Investigators believe the data under-reports the scope of the problem because the data doesn't catch incidents at private facilities. Brown explains, "Owners and operators can self-declare what kind of facility they're running and can bypass state requirements by categorizing themselves as a program that's not subject to licensing."

Some of the biggest red flags investigators uncovered were evidence of ineffective management, untrained staff, and reckless or negligent operating practices. "The so-called counselors who were responsible for monitoring the kids were basically high school babysitters," says Crystal. "The staff is trained to believe the kids are faking it to get out of the elements." There's also no way to track the number of abuse cases at any of these facilities because, according to the GAO, there's not a single website, federal agency, or other entity that collects comprehensive nationwide data.

The industry tends to attract affluent parents simply because of the staggering cost. A month of treatment can cost up to twenty thousand dollars. And there are plenty of parents who will say it's worth every penny. "A 30-day wilderness intervention program is the most powerful intervention tool that exists to save children's lives," said Michael Conner, Psy.D., a licensed psychologist and leading expert in wilderness-based therapy. Doctor Conner believes parents need to do their homework before sending their kids to one of these programs. "Don't trust what you see online," said Conner. "Don't trust [parent](#) testimonials. Trust professionals who have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly. "

Doctor Conner thinks parents need to take more responsibility before committing their kids. "Licensed mental health professionals who are familiar with a program should be making referrals for severely disturbed kids, not the parents," said Conner. "All programs will tell you they can help your child. But they won't tell you which is the best program for your child." He disputes claims that the staff at wilderness camps may be unqualified. "The wilderness programs I've worked with have better trained staff than you'd find in a residential treatment program," he said.

"Programs Do Make Mistakes"

A two-year study looked at 50 kids in three programs. After 30 days, 90% of the kids had improved to a functional level. After six months, 40% of those kids had **relapsed**, and after one year, half of those kids had recovered. "What these programs are doing is saving lives, but programs do make mistakes," said Conner.

Crystal Manganaro is paying dearly for one camp's mistakes. "Ever since Matthew died, I'm not the same person. I'm not a fun-loving person anymore. I'm not the same and never will be," said Crystal. She's now focused on advocacy work that involves changing the laws regulating wilderness intervention programs. Crystal, along with many other parents and teens who have had harmful experiences at these programs, is urging lawmakers to sign onto a bill called "Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act of 2009." The main focus of the legislation is setting up an ongoing review process for investigating and monitoring reported cases of abuse and neglect. The bill, H.R. 911, is still waiting for a sponsor.

Crystal is determined to prevent other parents from suffering what she has endured. "I feel like I have a mission now. Matthew didn't die in vain. He will still teach this world something."



Matt at Camp

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That is horrifying. Just heart-breaking. These programs need to be regulated by a state board or even a city inspector just as any counseling practice or common restaurant would be to make sure they're not hiring abusive thugs.

- MarcomMom

Posted 06/23/09 08:42 AM

Wow. This is horrible. It reminds me of the "old days" when parents used to send their kids to military school. I have a friend who told me stories about his sister and he at military camp. There was one drill where they had to be close to the ground and crawl to avoid the "enemy fire" and REAL bullets were streaking over their heads. This was 30-40 years ago.

- Kristie

Posted 06/23/09 12:30 PM

Matt's death was so tragic and unnecessary. I'm very glad Crystal is working to improve the situation so that other children don't suffer and die the way her son did. The camp counselors certainly need more training than CPR/First Aid. They need to be well educated in responding to potential problems from serious physical exertion.

- Kathy Slattengren

Posted 06/23/09 12:32 PM

I do not feel bad at all for this mother. There have been investigations into these camps as long as I can

remember. She knew the danger going in. All because her son was "closed off." She knew he had a disorder and her choice was to make him rough it and if he could not die. Well she got death and it is on her.

- Melissa

Posted 06/23/09 06:42 PM

Firstly, Melissa - you certainly could NOT be a Mom yourself to say those horrible things. You truly have NO HEART at all to be so cold. This story is completely tragic & horrific. Being a mother myself, I couldn't possibly imagine something like this happening to my little boy. It pains me to know that there are people like you that would accept this type of torture for your child or children - no matter what the case may be. Troubled parents with troubled teens often look for help in any way imaginable. Looking for assistance & have been brain washed into thinking that these folks have the solution in which most courts force you to take this option. I couldn't imagine in my worst nightmare to find that my son was tortured to death, literally. I'm extatic that Crystal has taken GREAT measures to fight against this worst form of abuse. And Melissa, one day you will be thankful for her efforts. Be careful what you say - what comes around goes around.

- Wendy

Posted 06/24/09 11:26 AM

That's terrible! Mistakes do happen but I hope they use this terrible mistake to get better educated about health matters so nothing like this ever happens again. Even more so, I don't think a child with Bipolar should even have been there. Wilderness camps are for kids with behavioural problems. Bipolar is a mental health problem with a scientific basis. He wasn't acting out because he was bad. He was sick.

- Callista

Posted 06/26/09 10:16 AM

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