



'Tough-Love' Camp Owner Faces Trial

Leland Baxter-Neal - July Friday 2006

More than four years after a government visit to a U.S.-run correctional school for troubled teenagers resulted in riots, runaways and the closing of the controversial center, owner Narvin Lichfield will go to trial, accused of violating the rights of the more than 180 mostly U.S. teens housed there.

Some said it was like a prison camp – a place where the youths had no rights, were harshly disciplined and even tortured. Supporters, however, said Dundee Ranch Academy was the best thing that ever happened to them, or their children, and helped turn wild, out-of-control teenagers into obedient and respectful citizens.

Before it closed in May 2003, Dundee Ranch had operated for a year on the remote grounds of a former eco-hotel about 15 kilometers from the Pacific-slope town of Orotina. The nontherapeutic, “tough-love” behavior-modification program cost parents more than \$2,000 a month, plus a one-time \$2,000 fee and \$295 for uniforms. The academy did not have any sort of operation permits from Costa Rican authorities.

Teenagers who had been sent to Dundee Ranch Academy – sometimes forcefully by burly “escorts” contracted by the parents – were put through school in a strict environment where small infractions such as talking and looking out the window or at members of the opposite sex could be punished, according to testimony from former students.

Students have also testified to beatings and periods of solitary confinement lasting more than 12 hours.

At Dundee, youths were segregated by sex into groups of 25 called “families.” Students followed strict daily regimens and could earn points by compliance, which allowed them to advance through a system of levels, working toward their freedom. At the camp, students either were not allowed to communicate with their parents, or their communications were closely monitored.

One distraught mother, Carey Bock, said her twin 16-year-old sons were subject to brainwashing and inhuman punishment at the academy. She led a commando-like raid to free the boys, who later described being forced to stand, kneel or lie down facing a wall for as long as 12 hours (TT, Oct. 25, 2002).

Many of these practices follow procedures developed by the WorldWide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP), which is based in the U.S. state of Utah and has various camps like Dundee Ranch around the world. Dundee was an affiliate, and Lichfield – a former used car salesman with a background in marketing – is the brother of WWASP founder Robert Lichfield.

Several WWASP affiliates around the world have been closed following complaints, lawsuits and legal investigations, and while some parents stand firmly by WWASP’s tactics, others have banded together and formed survivors’ groups, watchdog organizations and filed lawsuits against the association.

According to various sources including Costa Rican prosecutor Fernando Vargas, who first visited the program in 2002, and U.S. citizen Shelby Earnshaw, the director of a tough-love camp watchdog group called the International Survivors Action Committee (ISAC), this is the first time a criminal suit has been brought against a WWASP affiliate.

Lichfield’s trial is scheduled for Sept. 26-29 at the First Circuit Criminal Court in Alajuela, north of San José, where he will face charges of coercion, torture and illegally detaining the teens, according to the Judicial Branch’s press office. Edgar Oveida, the prosecutor in charge of the case, told The Tico Times Lichfield could get at least 10 years in prison if convicted on all accounts.

The Tico Times was unable to contact Lichfield or his defense lawyer, Alberto Bustos.

Lichfield is scheduled to stand trial alone because prosecutors decided during a preliminary hearing in April not to bring

charges against his Costa Rican wife, Flory Alvarado, who helped him run the center and was also arrested following the riots.

According to Oveido, charges against her were dropped because of a lack of evidence.

Three other camp employees, all Jamaicans, are wanted in connection with the case, but fled the country following the closure of the camp (TT, Sept. 5, 2003). A warrant for their arrest has been issued in Costa Rica. None of the directors or other workers from the academy have been charged.

A complaint of abuse from parent Susan Flowers, whose daughter was at the academy, prompted prosecutor Vargas to visit the facility twice in May 2003, with a judge, police officers and officials with the Child Welfare Office (PANI).

On his second visit, after Vargas had explained to the youths their rights under Costa Rican law and taken their testimony on their conditions, rioting erupted as Vargas and his large entourage left the site, Vargas told The Tico Times. Thirty-five of the teenagers escaped in the chaos, and Lichfield was arrested and detained for 24 hours. The escaped students were – after days – all accounted for, and sent home to their parents in the United States, or to other WWASP camps in the United States and Jamaica (TT, May 30, 2003).

Edgar Oveida, the lead prosecutor for the Atenas Prosecutor's Office, which has jurisdiction over the case, said he has requested that Vargas take charge of it. Vargas said he hopes to be involved because he has extensive experience and knowledge of the case. Oveida told The Tico Times that if Vargas were not given the case, he would use his colleague not only as an advisor but also as a witness at the trial.

According to Vargas, the case's success hinges largely on the teens' testimony, which is questionable because the students – none of whom are in the country – were not introduced at the preliminary hearing. That means they must be introduced at the trial, and the judge will decide then if their testimony is admissible.

Oveida said he believes they will be admitted. In addition, judicial officials took testimony from the students immediately following the closure of the school, before they left the country. This, he says, has already been made available to the defense and will be admissible in the hearing.

If there is further information needed from these witnesses, he added, they could be flown to Costa Rica through cooperation between the Judicial Branch and the U.S. Embassy, or they could provide their testimony from the United States – with the help of an official translator – by way of video conferencing.

The Tico Times is Central America's Leading English-Language Newspaper, covering news, business, tourism and cultural developments in Costa Rica and Central America. The award-winning weekly has been reporting on the region from San Jose, Costa Rica, since 1971 and became a member of the Inter-American Press Association in 1989. TT's Online Edition provides a brief capsule of stories appearing every Friday in our PRINT EDITION. And in response to reader demands, we now offer a complete DATABASE of back issues and online CLASSIFIEDS.

Call us at 258-1558 inside Costa Rica or from the U.S. 011 (506) 258-1558 or fax us at 233-6378 inside Costa Rica or from the U.S. 011 (506) 233-6378, email: info@ticotimes.net