



## Parent Cristine Gomez’s Story

I live in California and my son attended unregulated residential programs from August, 2000 until December, 2001, when he was 15 ½ to almost 17 years old. I am here to share with you our family’s experience, to illustrate some of the issues and hardships that families face when they seek support through unregulated programs.

First, here is a brief explanation of why and how we decided to send our son to a residential program: My husband and I had high hopes for our son and were always committed to providing him with the best

educational opportunities so that he could succeed. When he was in 2nd through 6th grade, we sent him to a private Christian school. When he was having difficulties paying attention and controlling his behavior, we took him to see a therapist. He was diagnosed with ADHD and prescribed meds. Then, when he was a young teenager, his behavior problems became more serious. The school was

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calling on a regular basis, and threatened to expel him. I was panicked. I’d been saving for him for college since before he was born—that was my goal for him.

We could have sent our son to the continuation school in our local school district, but we were hesitant to do so. In retrospect, I think I should have let him go to continuation school. He would have been fine; his friends turned out fine. Instead, we looked into a private alternative to continuation high school that we learned about through other parents. I understood it as a boarding school something like Eaton—progressive academics with therapeutic support and licensed / credentialed special education staff. I was led to believe my son would be in a structured environment that

worked with ADHD, with special education teachers on staff. This sounded good to us, because when we had sought help in our community, help was limited. We even went outside our provider network to go to a teen expert who cost \$300, but we saw no improvements.

So we sent our son to the residential program in Montana, a program that claimed to have a 97% success rate although we later learned there wasn't hard data from an outside source to back this claim. It cost \$3,000 per month so we both took second jobs to pay and trusted that our son would finally receive the help he needed. For 13 months we were out of communication with him and I really missed him while he was gone. They said, "Let your child work his program and you work on yours. He needs to earn the privilege to talk with you." We were told that our son "wasn't working the program" so he was placed in isolation, sometimes with other kids with serious behavioral problems. I attributed his inability to make progress in the program to his impulsivity, but the program staff didn't tell me that they didn't feed him and he was having stomach aches. When I asked why, the "family advocate" said, "He's just manipulating you." Later I found out he had injured his neck and the local doctor had put him on anti-inflammatory meds, which were upsetting his stomach. The program would drill on completing the program—they would describe kids who had left the program and say "If they'd only graduated the program, they wouldn't have gotten into trouble."

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As for the treatment provided by the program, untrained staff without skills to work with mental illness worked there. The program did not seem to provide services to address ADHD. I was paying the program \$400-700 monthly extra for additional anger management, group drug/alcohol support, and one-on-one therapy. Most of the time he was in "the Hobbit," which is what they called the isolation room.

We were told that an adolescent psychiatrist was prescribing Zyprexa for my son which we have since learned is an antipsychotic medication. An attorney for the Montana nursing board investigated this doctor due to multiple complaints from program parents. It turned out that he was a nurse practitioner, not a doctor.

At the holidays, I sent my son a big Christmas package—gloves and a jacket—he never received it. My son said later, “The staff said you knew.” My son was thinking his mother had abandoned him. Also, there was inadequate supervision. I was told a 24-hour staff slept in—well, it was kids who were providing the night time supervision! When we found out about an incident of physical violence among the kids in the program, involving our son, I called to ask how this could happen. They never called back. Four months after our son entered the program in Montana, the staff started encouraging us to give them permission to transfer him to one of the other residential programs run by the same U.S. company, located in Jamaica. I didn’t want him to go there because it was out of the country, but I equated it with my positive teen experience in Hawaii, so eventually we said okay to the transfer. After he was transferred, our son wrote to us about conditions in the program in Jamaica. He wrote that the sewage was overflowing. When I inquired, I was told, “Your child is manipulating you.” Then in November, 2001 our son wrote home and described how he’d witnessed another kid being punished. The staff had the kid under water in the shower and said they were “washing the blood of Christ over him.” We learned that staff treatment was to hold the kids under the cold showers. At that point, my husband said, “Let’s go get him.”

When we got there, you could feel the oppression—kids were sad, their heads bent down, no sound, no smiles, no posters on the walls. A staff member said, “I’m glad you are taking him home—he doesn’t belong here.” The family rep also said she was glad he was going because “He cries all the time.” My son was skinny and pale when we picked him up, and had a dislocated shoulder. He claimed he hit the door jamb but I don’t believe it.

*When our son came home, he was 16 months behind academically. He tried to go back to regular high school, but couldn’t catch up. He was placed in sophomore classes when he was a senior age.*

He then went to the local continuation school and that is how he finished high school. For the first two years, he said, “Mom, I don’t have any friends and I’m always angry.” I tried to explain to him that he was a victim and we would never have sent him there if we had known how he would be treated. The guilt I felt over having been so naïve and trusting in turning over my child to strangers...

Our son is 20, almost 21 now. His stomach hurts all the time. He says this is with him every day. I’ve since been asked, “Did you know the program was unregulated?” It never even entered my mind about whether it was regulated. These programs used inhumane treatment. My heart is broken. The damage these people have done is continual. I have letters where my son wrote, “Mom, please come get me!” I really believed I was sacrificing for his benefit. And it took a long time to release the guilt of not graduating the program when other parents were all graduating and the program made it seem like leaving before they said it was “okay” was a sign of failure.

This is a brief description of my family’s experience. Over the last several years, as I have learned more about these programs, I have been working to help support other families, via the Internet, and I have heard many other stories of mistreatment and abuse experienced through unregulated programs. Other parents say over and

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over that what they believed they were investing in—education and credentialed help—turned out not to be true. Some of the parents liquidated their assets and sold their homes to get help for their children, and then their children were mistreated. NONE of the parents wanted their kids to be abused. These kids are coming home traumatized, and it is a hard thing to admit...what we may have done as parents by sending our kids to these programs. All of the programs in the Teen Help industry need to be regulated. It’s too late for our family, but maybe we can help other parents. Our children are our most precious resource. Our children deserve to be protected.