



Lack of Training, Compassion and Effort Led to My Son's Death

By Crystal Manganaro

My name is Crystal Manganaro and I offer my story on behalf of my son, Matthew, and to tell you about our experience with Lonestar Expeditions, a therapeutic wilderness camp owned by Aspen Education Group.

Matthew, my baby, was a different kid most of his life and started getting into trouble in kindergarten. He was suicidal in the 4th grade and was hospitalized. Each year got worse for him emotionally and socially. When he was in 9th grade, I knew I had to do something. He no longer respected authority and refused to do anything he didn't want to do. When he bowed up to my husband, John, and said he would "effing" take him down, I knew I had to find a place to help him.

I had looked into different programs before Matt went to Lonestar Expeditions. On Sept. 7, 2004, I called Lonestar. I was asked to complete the online application and send it to them. If Matthew could be helped by them, they would let me know. I did as they asked and within an hour Matthew had been approved for their program. Only eight boys at a time was their limit and it just so happened they had a spot for Matt.

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The cost for a 28-day stay was \$12,000. The loan company Lonestar referred me to suggested I get \$15,000 to cover any extra incidentals. If you love your child the way I loved Matthew there is nothing you won't do to help them. On Sept. 8, John and I took Matthew to Lonestar. Matt knew what was going on and asked how long he would be there. Twenty-eight days is the minimum, he was told, but could be longer depending on how well he did. He looked at me and asked me twice to go outside with him. I told him no. I knew that I would change my

mind for the millionth time and take him home. I told Matt I loved him very much and hugged him as much as he would let me. He was then taken away from me. I didn't know that would be the last time I would see him alive.

John and I were led to an office where I could sign the all the necessary forms. Sign here, initial there, this says that, that says this. As a parent, like probably all parents that have gone through this, I did not sign these papers with a happy heart. This was a last resort for us. Being under duress is putting it mildly. Everything is a blur, and my thoughts are "If I don't do this right now, I won't do it at all." These companies know this and play on us.

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There was a paragraph that I initialed that said,

"Sponsor [me] intends by this Waiver and Release to release, in advance, and to waive his or her rights and discharge each and every one of the Released Parties [them, Lonestar], from any and all claims for damages for death, personal injury or property damage which Sponsor may have, or which may hereafter accrue as a result of Student's participation in any aspect of the Programs, even though that liability may arise from negligence or carelessness on the part of the persons or entities being released, from dangerous or defective property or equipment owned, maintained or controlled by them or because of their possible liability without fault. Additionally, Sponsor covenants not to sue any of the Released Parties based upon their breach of any duty owed to Sponsor or Student as a result of their participation in any aspect of the Programs."

This was not explained while the papers are being flipped.

What I didn't know until we sued the program was that Matthew had to sign five legal forms the day he was admitted. Two full pages referred to his rights. A 14-year-old kid should not be signing anything without a parent or guardian as a witness. Apparently, these forms were flung at him like they were at me. Believe me when I say that had Matt known he had any rights whatsoever he would have acted on them if given the chance. Either he wasn't allowed to read the papers he was made to sign, of which I have a copy, or he wasn't allowed to exercise his rights. I don't know the answer to this.

Matthew was on medication for bi-polar disorder. At home, every night was a fight to get him to take the medication, only because he fought anything I asked him to do. I'm telling you this because Matthew refused his medication at the camp. They were to call me and his doctor if he refused any medication. I never got a phone call and neither did his doctor. Well, his doctor did get a phone call, the day after Matt died. Matthew had suffered over 24 hours in excruciating pain. The night before he died, Sept. 16, he complained of his chest hurting, he was mumbling and stumbling around and his legs felt numb. The field instructors called the psychologist, and over the phone, he decided it was just an anxiety attack, don't worry about it.

When he made it to camp, Matt collapsed. The staff kept telling him to get up and set up camp, he could lay down later. They kept telling him to quit faking. After about 20 minutes, they thought he was snoring. No, he was aspirating. He was dying and they never even looked at him.

On Sept. 17, nine days after he entered the program, Matt's group was on a one-mile hike and they got lost. So the hike ended up being more than three miles with the heat index between 115° and 130°. When they stopped for lunch, Matthew said he couldn't go any further. The staff said they have to make it to the evening camp and to move it. He just couldn't move and the other boys offered to carry him. The peer pressure must have been tough because Matthew finally struggled and moved.

When they got close to the evening camp, after many stops for Matt to rest, Matt was really struggling, especially the last 200 yards. There were only five boys and two field instructors. Someone should have been able to physically go and check out Matthew. One of the instructors personally told me to my face that he was an ex-Navy SEAL and that Matthew was the first person he had ever lost doing CPR. This person was never in the Navy, but Aspen Education Group apparently didn't do a background check. Everyone he worked with thought he was ex-Navy. Now how can that happen?

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I had so many questions because something never felt right. This was not just a tragic accident as I was being told. After six months, I contacted a lawyer friend of mine, who also knew Matthew, and asked if he would help me. After two

years of finding out all we could, we filed a lawsuit in Los Angeles, CA. The depositions started for both sides; the Vice President of Aspen Education Group, the field medic, the director at the time of Matt's death, three field instructors, the medical expert, and a few more were all deposed. The court date had been set, but the legal system really tries to go for mediation. Okay, fine with me. I was ready to fight for Matthew's rights as a human being.

Both sides of the lawsuit were all in a room together and the deposition video was shown. This was the first time I was allowed to see it—all the depositions from the Aspen side, and all the interviews from me, my family, my boss at the time, and Matthew's counselor he had been seeing for years. I learned about many things I didn't know had happened. I broke down so many times finding out things I really didn't want to know, but needed to know.

On the video, the medical expert said that anyone with any type of outdoor training, especially in the extreme heat and humidity the day Matt died, would have known how absolutely dangerous this was; it was critical to get him (Matt) to emergency care at the first symptoms. His words were that these actions were “obscene and making [Matt] continue to carry on and then collapsing in this type of heat is what killed him.” That day Matt had been wearing heavy khaki jackets, long sleeved green undershirts, khaki pants, wool knee socks and boots.

One of the field instructors confessed to throwing water on Matt and telling him he knew he was faking and to get up. When asked in the deposition if he thought Matt was faking when the snoring sound started, the field instructor said that yes he did. He rolled Matt over, told him to get up, and Matt opened his eyes, then they rolled in a circle and shut. That was when the field instructor thought something might be wrong, and the field medic was finally called. Everything took so long. Matt had no chance of survival due to their lack of training, compassion, and effort.

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At the end of the 40-minute video, there wasn't a dry eye in the room, from either side. Aspen did not want to go to court. I was told this case was going to be settled. Back and forth, back and forth. I kept saying no, even as I was advised that this was the best offer. Offer? Is there an amount of money that is good enough? No, there isn't. But I knew at some point I would have to settle so I could talk about the horrendous things that go on at these types of camps.

In the State of Texas, residential treatment centers are not required to have a registered nurse on staff unless they have 25 or more kids. This is unacceptable to me. There are changes that need to happen and I believe they can happen with the right structure, in order to protect the child and inform the parents daily of everything going on with their child. My son is dead and there is nothing I can do about that, but I'll be damned if my son died in vain. These are our kids, our future. No one should have to go through the hell I have been through. For those of you who have not lived through losing a child due to negligence, you just cannot imagine what it feels like unless you have walked through it, and deal with it every day of your life.