

Testimony of Bob Bacon, father of Aaron Bacon

Committee on Education and Labor

October 10, 2007

Chairman Miller and Distinguished Committee Members,

My name is Bob Bacon, the father of Aaron Bacon.

Speaking for my wife, and Aaron's mother Sally, his brother Jarid and his sister Kia Sullivan; and speaking on behalf of the many families not at this table whose lives have been shattered by these fraudulent programs, we deeply appreciate your efforts to put a stop to this country's growing industry of institutionalized child abuse.

During our search for the best alternative to the remaining three months of Aaron's sophomore year in high school, my wife and I spoke with therapists, counselors, pastors and doctors until we were eventually referred by friends to North Star Expeditions, a now defunct, but formerly licensed Utah-based program that billed itself as a "wilderness therapy program for troubled teens."

After reading their very compelling brochure, speaking to their office by phone, and finally meeting the owners for a personal interview, we thought we had found the perfect situation: Caring people who were experienced in counseling kids who were struggling with drugs and social pressure – and to top it off - writing in a daily journal we were told was an integral part of their "counseling" program. As a writer, we felt journaling would help Aaron to sort things out; and we were certain that,

as a poet Aaron would find the awesome beauty of southern Utah to be inspirational and spiritually healing.

Of course, being normal, trusting and honest people ourselves— we assumed we were being told the truth. We were dead wrong. His mother and I will never escape our decision to send our gifted 16 year old son to his death at North Star. The guilt of our apparent naiveté was crippling. We were conned by their fraudulent claims, and will go to our graves regretting our gullibility.

Adding further to our regret, we were talked into using their escort service. Aaron was taken from his bed at 5:00 AM on Tuesday morning, March the 1st, 1994 by two burley strangers who announced to Aaron with a tone of authority that any resistance on his part would be countered with whatever physical force was necessary. He was not allowed to speak to us, or put on any shoes.

His eyes expressed a strange mixture of anger, despair, fear and loving sadness. I was able to manage only the briefest of hugs which, being restrained, he could not return. In the trauma of this surreal instant I offered words of comfort without thinking of their potentially ominous meaning when I said, “Aaron, I know you will find God in the wilderness.” Little did I know that these would be the last words I would ever speak to my youngest son!

His mother managed only a fleeting moment to cradle his face in her hands and utter her spontaneous words of love and the assurance that he would later see that this was really for the best.

I cried inconsolably from the depths of my soul as the escort van backed out of our driveway with our terrified son silently pleading with his sad eyes for us not to send him away. This excruciating scene would have to serve for the rest of our lives as the last living memory of our beautiful son.

Aaron arrived in the Escalante Wilderness Area of southern Utah that same night and waited a few days for a brief intake exam, indoctrination into the rules of the program, and the issue of ill-fitting shoes and clothing. This picture of him was taken on March 8th, when he was noted as weighing 131 pounds on a lanky 5'-11" frame.

Aaron's bloody and tattered journal would contain no poetry, but would record in his own words an unbelievable account of torture, abuse and neglect; a horrific tale that is corroborated by the journals of the so-called "counselors", along with the journals and sworn testimony of his troubled young cohorts.

This calendar was assembled by criminal investigators from program records and chronicles 21 days of ruthless and relentless physical and psychological abuse and neglect. Aaron spent 14 of his 20 days on the trail without any food whatsoever, while being forced to hike 8-10 miles per day. On the days he did have food it consisted of undercooked lentils, lizards, scorpions, trail mix, and a celebrated canned peach on the 13th. On top of this, with temperatures below freezing, he endured 13 of 20 nights with only a thin wool blanket, plus 5 nights without warmth or protection of any kind. Aaron complained of severe stomach pain and asked to see a doctor as early as the third day of hiking,

and by the tenth day had lost all control of his bodily functions; but unbelievably, as he got weaker and lost nearly 20% of his body weight they repeatedly refused to send him to a doctor. Taken from what appears to be the industry handbook, their policy had predetermined that these kids are all liars and manipulators and therefore “Aaron was faking.”

[Slide #3] This grotesque skeleton is what Aaron looked like when he was seen the evening before he died by Georgette Costigan, the registered EMT who, still insisting that he was faking, didn’t even take his vital signs, but instead took the occasion to barter a meager piece of cheese in return for his promise to try harder and hike the following day. This company employed EMT, and relative of owner Bill Henry, dismissed his final desperate plea to see a doctor who could prove he wasn’t faking and made a conscious decision to prove a point rather than render aid, thus effectively killing our son rather than saving him.

What you cannot see in these photos are the bruises, cuts, lesions, rashes, blisters and open sores that covered Aaron’s body from head to toe. These scars of abuse and the dried skin stretched taut over his bones are what his mother and I were left to discover without any warning when the sheet was pulled back at the mortuary. This, we screamed, could not be our son as we grabbed each other and collapsed to our knees, but the scar above his now sunken right eye told us that it was. It was in that one shocking moment of proof that our lives changed forever.

The stories of Aaron’s death and the others who have died, or survived the abuses of these programs, are chilling reminders of the dangers of absolute power, and point out the extremely high risks we take

in allowing these programs to operate without strict regulation and oversight.

This country, this congress and this committee are faced as never before with several urgent and critically important choices.

If we choose economic growth over human rights; if we choose no-growth-in-government over the safety of our children; and if we continue to place our faith in the self-regulation of private enterprise over the mandate of our government to protect our nation's health, safety and welfare, we are choosing to fail in our sacred obligations to our children, our families, and our future.

I implore you, as I know Aaron would, to PLEASE stop paying lip service to "family values" and start placing "value-in-families." We can do this in part, by investing the resources of the American people in our children who will soon inherit our challenging legacy; and we can START NOW by putting a stop to these fraudulent and destructive programs of institutionalized child abuse.

Respectfully,
Bob Bacon, father