

**Statement of Cynthia Clark Harvey,
mother of Erica Clark Harvey, before the
House Committee on Education and Labor**

October 10, 2007

Thank you, Chairman Miller, and those Committee members present today for the opportunity to share our family's story. Our story is a personal tragedy, but please remember that for each family that has suffered the ultimate damage, the death of a beloved child, there are perhaps thousands of others who have suffered physical or psychological neglect and abuse. For those individual and family victims, there is no public acknowledgement of their sorrow and pain, as there has been of ours.

Our first-born, Erica, was an amazing kid—everyone says that about their own, but it's true, she was. So many times during Erica's too-short life, she'd do or say or create something that just knocked our socks off. Erica was an incredible student, straight A's, with Gifted classes in Math and Language. She was a competitive springboard diver with dozens of medals. Erica was a musician who played clarinet and drums, a prize-winning visual artist, a weekly volunteer with a local animal shelter from the time she was 10 (and dragged us along, so they got two, three or four for the price of one determined little girl.)

Erica's bright light seemed to flicker, when at fourteen and in the 8th grade, she began to experience mental health problems. Erica became depressed, then suicidal. She engaged in cutting behaviors. To medicate herself, she began abusing illegal drugs. Erica was hurting in many ways and our whole family was suffering.

Erica was in the care of a psychiatrist and a therapist, who both recommended that we consider a residential treatment program. Michael and I were desperate to find help for Erica. Our daughter was 15 and a half years old when we made the decision to send her to what we believed was a legitimate treatment program, a place staffed with people who could help our family move forward from some very dark times.

We compared several programs over a period of many weeks. We eventually focused in on CF because they were, and continue to be, leaders in the industry, one of the founding members of NATSAP, and of OBHIC.

We chose CF because they claimed to be fully licensed, because they were JCAHO accredited, because they claimed experience with teens being treated with psychiatric medications. We, as parents, were interviewed by the program. We laid bare our hearts, our souls and our story to the program. They told us our daughter would be treated by experienced staff: experienced therapists and experienced wilderness guides and emergency medical technicians (EMTs). They touted their back country planning and emergency procedures.

They told us we could trust our most precious firstborn daughter, Erica, to them.

On May 26th, 2002, we arrived at CF's Nevada office. We had been advised by CF not to tell Erica we were placing her until our arrival for the family meeting that would begin the trek. Of all the many profound and tormenting regrets we have about our terrible decision, agreeing to deceive Erica is one of the worst. When we told her why we were there, she was shocked, angry and scared. We will be haunted as long as we live by Erica's cry of *Please, Daddy, don't make me go.*

On May 27th, 2002, the first full day of Erica's Nevada wilderness trek, CF's trusted team mistook a dire medical emergency for teenage belligerence and Erica died that afternoon of heat stroke with dehydration. Over a period of hours, Erica's condition had worsened as she was pushed to keep hiking. When Erica's eyes rolled into the back of her head and she fell off the trail, head first, into rocks and scrub brush, she was left to lie where she fell for forty five minutes, while two CF staffers, still unwilling or unable to recognize what was happening, watched Erica die a slow, painful death.

When the CF team finally responded to Erica's last few tortured breaths, they contacted their on-call medical doctor, but the "doctor" turned out not to be a doctor at all, rather a physician's assistant located in Oregon. They called the local authorities to ask for help and a helicopter to get Erica to a hospital but they didn't know where they were and sent the search and rescue team the wrong GPS coordinates. The helicopter took hours to arrive because, contrary to the advance planning that we were told to expect, no arrangements with local authorities had been made, nor was any sort of trip plan filed. Later we found out that none of the CF team had experience with administering psychotropic drugs and no training in how to evaluate those drugs' effect on an

individual during a trek. We also found out that the EMT on the team was on his very first trek, had only recently completed coursework in WEMT and had never experienced a real medical emergency before.

Six days from today, October 16, is Erica's 21st birthday. The day she was born, we held her and we saw the universe in her fierce dark eyes. We filled ourselves with dreams for her. We imagined who she'd be at two, at ten, at twelve, twenty-one, thirty. Today we're left with only memories, some of them beautiful, some of them harsh, and no dreams of Erica's tomorrows.

Erica Clark Harvey October 16, 1986--May 27, 2002