

Testimony of Paul Lewis Father of Ryan C. Lewis

Our son, Ryan lived his life to the fullest, surrounded by adoring friends and relatives. He was a Boy Scout and a fire explorer. As an avid outdoor enthusiast, he enjoyed kayaking, camping, hiking, and mountain biking. He read for hours and was a master at putting together complicated ship and airplane models. He was an all American boy with sparkling blue eyes and a big smile that lit up his freckled face and our whole world.

Ryan could weave an entertaining story and was often times hilarious in his presentation. He had a remarkable way of relating to people of all ages and could draw anyone into conversation on a variety of topics. He was sensitive to others and could articulate his views and feelings way beyond someone his age. He was a history buff and could match any adult conversation about WW11. In fact, one night we met two WW11 Vets in a restaurant and one remarked that Ryan knew more about the war than he did and he was there!

With all of Ryan's extraordinary qualities, he sadly suffered from clinical depression. He was a brave and courageous person who battled the darkness valiantly. But as a family, we knew that we needed help from professionals and sought help from a clinical psychologist and child psychiatrist. In addition, what Ryan needed was an integrated program where he could continue his schooling and receive therapy while being among peers.

After exhausting all local resources to help Ryan, we reached out to Steve Bozak, an educational consultant. We provided him with all Ryan's educational and medical records. Given Ryan's background, he strongly recommended a Therapeutic Wilderness Program named Alldredge Academy in Davis, West Virginia. He told us this would be the safest, most appropriate place for Ryan. Ryan's psychiatrist, after speaking to the Admissions department also agreed that this might meet Ryan's needs.

Educational and medical records were then sent as well as detailed psychiatric information required on an extensive application. We were very hesitant to send Ryan so far away but the program's marketing was first rate, appearing to be just what Ryan needed. Alldredge used Ryan's love of the outdoors as a selling tool. The admissions personnel repeatedly touted their professionalism and expertise with children who had the same psychiatric diagnosis as Ryan's. On February 7, 2001 we enrolled Ryan and were again reassured by the program personnel that Ryan would be safe. We called every day to inquire about how Ryan was doing and we were assured that he was "just fine".

On February 13, only seven days into the program we were startled by a call at 11:15 at night. The news ripped through us like an explosion, tearing us into a million pieces. L. Jay Mitchell, the owner of Alldredge Academy, informed us that Ryan had hung himself. He told us that there was no indication that Ryan was in trouble, it caught them all

completely by surprise and there was nothing they could have done. The next day, we flew to West Virginia and met with L. Jay Mitchell, John Weston White, and Lance Wells who repeated the same story as the night before. The story didn't make sense to me. The following day we met with the investigating West Virginia State Trooper who told us we were being lied to about the circumstances of Ryan's death.

This news was like losing Ryan all over again since, in his view, it was a death that could have been prevented. He told us was the night before Ryan died; he had slashed his left forearm four times with a program issued pocket knife. He told them, "Take this away from me before I hurt myself anymore; I can't take it anymore, I want to call my Mom and I want to go home." The counselors talked to him for a few minutes and he was told that people who could help him were coming out the next day. Then they gave the knife back to him. L. Jay Mitchell and John Weston White arrived the next day. Even though they called themselves therapists, neither of them had any credentials that would remotely qualify them as mental health professionals. In fact, L. Jay Mitchell is a lawyer. These individuals decided Ryan's desperate cry for help was manipulation so that he could get out of their program. Ryan was ignored and consequently at approximately 7:30 on a cold rainy night, desperate, alone, and abandoned, our young son hung himself.

One year later, Alldredge Academy, Ayne Institute, L. Jay Mitchell and John Weston White were indicted by the state of West Virginia for 'Child Neglect Resulting in Death'. We were adamantly opposed to the plea agreement made that allowed Alldredge Academy, the corporation, to plead no-contest in exchange for dropping charges against the individuals. Alldredge was fined \$5000.00 for the horrific death of our son.

We filed a civil suit alleging wrongful death, fraud, and a tort of outrage. Once again, L Jay Mitchell was unable to defend himself and acknowledged fault. In spite of two court verdicts, L. Jay Mitchell continues in this business. In my opinion, as we sit here today, children are at great risk. Astonishingly, Alldredge continues to be a proud member of (NATSAP) National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs.

Losing Ryan has been devastating to our family, our friends and the people in our community. We miss him terribly and live with this nightmare every day. All we have left are our fragile memories of Ryan and wonderment of the prospects that could have been. We don't want other families to suffer the overwhelming loss of a child in this fraudulent industry. We ask you, Congressman Miller to do everything in your power to put an end to this gross abuse of our children. Thank you for this opportunity to share Ryan's story.

Our family was duped into believing that caring people would help Ryan who was struggling with a learning disability and clinical depression. We thought these were professionals who knew what they were doing. We had no idea that their interest was profit, not healing.

There are also additional details to our story that provide a deeper understanding of issues involved in this fraudulent residential facility claiming to help children by providing therapy and education. We would like to add these to the record.

For example, consider these facts: While he was in the program, Ryan was 5'1 and weighed 90 pounds. He was forced to carry a makeshift backpack with approximately 60 pounds of gear. At one point, he was restrained and had water forced down him.

In addition, Ryan was forced to hike in silence. This was critical because Ryan was very articulate and was not allowed to express his feelings. There is no therapeutic justification for such a policy.

Further, once he had cut his arm with the program-issued knife, there was no monitoring of his behavior. No buddy system was employed nor were counselors vigilant at staying with him at all times. Though he was clearly expressing suicidal thoughts and behaviors-- and had been sent to the program with a diagnosis of depression--no mental health professional was consulted to determine whether he should continue in the program or be hospitalized. Nor were we even notified that he'd expressed such despair.

The program was completely unprepared to deal with cases like Ryan's. It operated under the assumption that all teenage misbehavior is "lies" and "manipulation" and that even depression is just "attention seeking," not a mental illness that warrants compassion and support. We believed we were putting our child in the care of people who knew what they were doing-- and yet the program didn't even have a protocol in place to deal with suicides. We had no way of knowing that these people had no business dealing with sick children-- there was no law in place that said they couldn't sell their services as a treatment for depression.

There were also additional signs of amateurism and complete insensitivity to the children they were supposed to be helping. For one, Ryan died at approximately 7:30 P.M. and we were not notified until 11:15 P.M., a four hour delay. Phone records show that there were 30-40 calls made during that four hour delay. Clearly, they were scrambling to cover up what had gone on and figure out how to make it look better.

Another example: in an early press release, Alldredge claimed that none of the other children saw Ryan. This was not true, in fact, another child found him. This child has been forever traumatized.

In violation of confidentiality rules, another early press release provided enough information about Ryan's funeral service to identify him.

Finally, in yet another press release, personnel at Alldredge claimed that all the children successfully completed the program. This was not the case. In fact, two weeks after Ryan died, another child that had been in his group, slit his wrists. He was evacuated, hospitalized, and sent home.

Four weeks into the program, a third child in his group threatened suicide in a note to his mother. He, too, went home. It was too late for Ryan.

Alldredge Academy has changed its name to Alldredge Wilderness Journey. Although he is not listed as a staff member, L. Jay Mitchell is still actively involved in the operation of the program. For parents in crisis, it would be very difficult to get an accurate history on the program.

We urge Congress to act to prevent people who do not know how to treat children with dignity-- let alone treat mental illness-- from selling their fraudulent treatment to other vulnerable parents and children. People with mental illness should have the right to safe, effective treatment that people with physical illness do-- and these predators should not be allowed to prey on them and their parents.

Prepared by Paul Lewis, parent of Ryan C. Lewis 1/30/87 – 2/13/01