

Statement of Kathryn Whitehead
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Youth
Before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor
Hearing on “Child Abuse and Deceptive Marketing by Residential Programs
for Teens”
April 24, 2008

Good morning Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. I appreciate your leadership and efforts to help protect youth from abuse and neglect by convening this hearing.

I am here to share the tragic experience of myself and family at an unregulated facility in Montana called Mission Mountain School. I am also here to tell you about the patterns of mistreatment and abuse of youth in residential programs across the country, which I have become aware of through my work with the youth advocacy group, Community Alliance for the Ethical Treatment of Youth. Finally, I will offer my perspective on the ways in which legislation could help to increase protections and at long last bring an end to the atrocious mistreatment of American youth in residential facilities across the country.

My story is one of a youth battling mental illness, a group of Montana residents taking the liberty to assume that their own experience as recovering alcoholics was qualification enough to operate a facility for struggling youth, and parents operating from a place of gullible desperation, willing to spend upwards of \$70,000 to fund a fictitious therapeutic milieu that amounted to little more than humiliation, deprivation and abuse – leaving in its wake a family torn apart and a traumatized 15 year old.

At the age of 13 I was diagnosed with chronic depression following a suicide attempt, and hospitalized at a local psychiatric hospital. When I was discharged,

lacking any community based support, my family sought to identify services outside of my community and found Mission Mountain School at the recommendation of a hired educational consultant.

Mission Mountain School held great promise, as it was sold to us as a small family-like therapeutic environment for girls ages 12-18 with above average intelligence. It was located in picturesque Condon MT. Though I felt unspeakable grief at leaving my family and all that was familiar to me behind, I knew I needed help. I packed my treasured belongings, reminders of home, and my mom and I flew out to MT. I felt hopeful, that maybe this 'special school' for kids like me would help me, as they claimed to have the ability to treat any myriad of serious psychiatric issues, such as bipolar disorder, eating disorders and depression.

Sadly, this could not be further from the truth. Upon arrival I quickly encountered the punitive and invasive interventions, which would come to define my 18 months at Mission Mountain School.

My mom left me shortly after we had arrived and my belongings were taken from me. I never received any explanation of the rules of the program, though the rules quickly took shape during the series of groups sessions held daily. Everyone was called out in group when they first arrived - every infraction was framed as an act of dishonesty. We were all labeled "liars" and "manipulators" upon arrival. Our daily diaries were read, and compared to the detailed life histories that we were forced to write soon after arrival, which were required to include details of every sexual encounter we had experienced in our short lives to ensure accuracy.

Often there were 'punishments' when we were thought to have been dishonest, euphemistically called "consequences." Consequence always involved some type of physical punishment – forced labor, such as ice picking, rock picking, and chopping wood. More "serious" rule breaking would result in what was called an "intervention," which was work crew all day long with breaks only during group, chores and mealtime.

Sometimes the group was put on "interventions" which would last for weeks if not months, and during this time no contact was allowed with the outside. It was generally understood that we were being exhausted for the purpose of making us more truthful – whatever that meant to those in charge. Exercise was a rigorous daily requirement. Slowing down from exhaustion only resulted in more exercise or getting yelled at.

I was not allowed to speak with my family for months after I arrived, and calls thereafter were monitored. Any criticisms were labeled as "manipulative" and my phone call was promptly disconnected, followed by punishment. If at some point we "advanced" enough in the program to not require such monitoring, that just meant that by that point, we were no longer expressing our concerns because we knew our parents wouldn't believe us anyway.

The most powerful figure at the facility was the headmaster who has no formal training in mental health and whose group therapy sessions were particularly bizarre and frightening. He was often confrontational or would smirk and laugh. He would pit friends against friends, and force us to say mean things to one another. He would attempt to unearth repressed memories and encourage regressive states. I recall that on multiple occasions my friends speaking as if they were toddlers, recounting alleged instances of abuse. Hours would be spent with girls reliving their traumatic experiences at the unqualified hands of the staff. Intensive group sessions sometimes lasted all night. Bathroom use was heavily regulated. Any allegations of abuse discussed in group "therapy" were never reported by staff to proper authorities.

Because all of the founders were members of AA, it seemed to them that everyone was an addict of sorts. I was deemed an alcoholic and sex addict, a close friend was deemed a sex addict. She had never had sex in her life, and denied the claim and as a result, staff forced her to carry 6 large rocks on her back at all times for several months, naming them issues like "sexual abuse" and "sex addiction," until she conceded to staff that each issue was true, detailing

traumatizing experiences supportive of that claim. When I got caught with a plan to run away I was placed on personal intervention where I had to rock pick for a week, eight to ten hours a day, at one point dropped off 25 miles from school and forced to hike back. This was all done in the name of therapy.

At other times inappropriate and humiliating interventions were used such as forbidding youth from talking for several weeks at a time, forcing youth to wear gloves because it was thought that they masturbated, or tying two girls together because two girls didn't get along. Claims of illness were framed as manipulative.

Education was non-existent; schooling a joke. We would have schooling maybe a few hours a day a couple days out of the week. I taught myself algebra, and uncertified teachers taught English and Spanish. We weren't allowed any information about the outside world such as newspapers or news magazines. I learned next to nothing. It wasn't until I was nearing graduation from Mission Mountain School that I underwent testing outside of the facility and was diagnosed with a learning disability.

We had no access to advocates, no rights whatsoever. Groups of educational consultants would come in on occasion for a visit. They were always impressed by our manners and ability to be so forthcoming. None came to the facility unannounced. None asked us for our honest opinions of the program... although even if they had, given the insidious fear-based environment, it's doubtful I would've spoken – it wasn't long before I was broken down and I came to believe what I was told: that Mission Mountain School was to be the only place that could save me from myself or I'd end up in "jail, insane or dead". The cumulative effect of the program was losing all sense of self.

Then one day, 18 months later, I was told I was to be discharged. None of it made any sense to me – though I was told I had been given the tools to live, I found it difficult to reconcile their claim with my internal landscape. My nights

were filled with a reoccurring nightmare of being chased by the founders and brought back to the facility, despite my protests explaining that I was healthy now. In the end, all Mission Mountain School gave me was more confusion, increased anxiety and depression, and made social functioning after discharge evermore difficult. It wasn't until 10 years later that I came to recognize the damage done and sought change.

I'd like to speak about the work I've done since then, which will hopefully speak to the broad pattern of atrocities Dr. Pinto commented on in her testimony at the hearings in October 2007. As co-founder and Executive Director of the Community Alliance for the Ethical Treatment of Youth, I have heard from over one thousand survivors and understand that, in most instances, parents remain unaware of the abuse their children have experienced and often firmly believe the program saved their child life. To me, this is the saddest repercussion of these facilities. At once not only is the trust between parent and child broken, but the truth of the youth is further hidden behind a façade promulgated by deceived parents. In my communications the majority of folks I've been in contact with have reported first hand with regards to:

- * Trauma due to use of escort services
- * Communication and privacy rights violations such as mail-monitoring, call-monitoring and filtering, restricted or interrupted correspondence.
- * Inappropriate Seclusion and Restraint
- * Inhumane Treatment such as:
 - Forced labor
 - Restricted access to the bathroom
 - Scare tactics
 - Exposure to harsh elements
 - Excessive exercise
 - Food/nutritional deprivation
 - Sleep deprivation
 - Physical punishment
 - Emotional, physical or sexual abused by staff
- * Education and Mental Health Treatment
 - no individualized plan
 - dissatisfaction with the training background of the staff members who were providing education, therapy,

support and/or care

What I am hoping to convey today through my testimony is that numerous residential facilities that are in operation today are stripping youth of their basic human rights to dignity, respect, to least restrictive care, appropriate mental health treatment, to education and parental contact, to freedom of thought, opinion and association, and ultimately to freedom from censorship and torture. The legitimate practice of therapeutic intervention is being injected with a perverse form of social control, including inhumane treatment and practices, which defy the ethical principles upheld by peer reviewed mental health practices.

As a nation it is our obligation to hold places of care accountable to their claim. A nation with the best interest of the child in mind must be in the position to assure this is occurring. For this reason it is critical that oversight is stringent enough for this to occur, it is questionable that youth safety can be assured if visits occur once every 2 years. Quality assurance is paramount – if a place claims to be a place of healing a facility must be able to back up such claims. It is our nations responsibility to families to ensure not just that abuse is not occurring, but that therapy is never used as justification for the violation of the human rights of youth. Consistent with such commitment, every youth ought be entitled to the least restrictive care possible. Facilities must be held accountable to claims that deceive parents into thinking that no alternative exists and that years of imprisonment are a necessary therapeutic intervention. Of concern are misinformed families who lack community support and feel they have no alternative but to choose institutionalize their child (unnecessarily) at the behest of programs concerned with their interests over that of the youth.

I strongly believe this bill to be a promising and important first step in curbing such draconian methodology this industry has been founded upon and applaud Chairman Miller for introducing the first piece of comprehensive legislation to that end.