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## Is This A Camp Or Jail?

**Are parents violating the rights of their own kids when they ship them off for tough "attitude rehab"?**

By **ADAM COHEN**



U.S. Edition

"Since you have sent me here, I will take care of my issues so that I can come home soon and be a better, happier and nicer and smarter person than when I came here. The water is so blue, the beach looks so sandy, the hills are so green, the weather is so nice--and the chain link so high."

--Letter from David van Blarigan, Tranquility Bay, Jamaica, to his parents, Dec. 15, 1997

**J**ust past midnight, David van Blarigan, 16, woke up in his Oakland, Calif., home to find his parents at his bedside with the two burly strangers they had called to take him away. "Why are you doing this?" the teenager cried out. "Because you're unhappy here," his mother replied. "If you don't cooperate," one of his escorts said, "we'll have to put you in handcuffs." David's first stop was Brightway Adolescent Hospital, a mental facility 700 miles away in St. George, Utah. Although David had no criminal record, was not violent and hadn't been abusing drugs or alcohol, a Brightway psychiatrist determined that the boy required prolonged treatment. He prescribed a one-year stay at Tranquility Bay, a "behavior modification school."

That is David's account of how he ended up at Tranquility Bay, and it's at the heart of a lawsuit asking a court to order him returned to California over his parents' objections. David's case, on which a superior-court judge in Oakland is expected to rule this week, pits the civil liberties of a teenager against the right of a parent to decide how to raise a child. It also shines a spotlight on the shadowy world of for-profit "attitude adjustment" camps and schools. Some parents who have resorted to such programs say

their intensive boot camp-style approach has been the crucial factor in turning around their troubled children's lives. But critics charge that many of the camps hold children prisoner, inflict what they consider to be physical and mental abuse--and sometimes cause death.

Behavior modification schools advertise in the back of mainstream magazines like *Sunset*, and their slogans are as no-nonsense as a five-mile run at sunrise. "Attitudes adjusted here," says an ad for the Ascent Program. Sea Hawk Academy promises "the wake-up call your teenager needs." Many offer to arrange the kind of "escort service" David van Blarigan found at his bedside. The schools and camps are often isolated, either in rural America (Thompson Falls, Mont.) or in faraway locales (Western Samoa). They number as many as 2,000, estimates Alexia Parks, author of a new online report on the subject, *An American Gulag*, and they come in many varieties: religious, military-style, and some focused on special issues, like drug abuse. A few try to "shock" gay children back to heterosexuality.

Life in many attitude-adjustment schools is closer to prison than prep school. Facilities are spartan, discipline strict. At Tranquility Bay, students are supervised from wake-up at 6:30 a.m. to lights-out at 9:30 p.m. Punishment for violations of the 54-page student rule book range from loss of merit points to "observation placement"--meaning a student must lie on the tile floor of his room all day, not sitting up except for meals and bathroom breaks. And parents sign a contract allowing the school to use handcuffs, mace and stun guns on their children. "Restraints are rare," says Jay Kay, a former San Diego gas-station and mini-mart manager who owns and operates Tranquility Bay. "But we take them seriously, and we train for them."

The love is even tougher at attitude-adjustment wilderness camps. Teens are enrolled for one to three months of rigorous camping and treks through the wild. To establish discipline, food and water are often withheld. For punishment, the camps often impose grueling hikes and uncomfortable sleeping conditions. Cathy and Bob Sutton of Ripon, Calif., sent their 16-year-old daughter Michelle to camp Summit Quest in the summer of 1990 because she had become depressed and dabbled with drugs after she was date-raped. The Suttons, who thought from a marketing director's pitch that the camp sounded challenging but kind, paid \$14,000 for 63 days. But Michelle's counselors got lost on an exercise in which the campers had limited supplies of water. When Michelle ran out of water, a counselor told the other hikers not to share, and joked that Michelle's parched mouth was so white "it looks like you've been eating marshmallows." After complaining she couldn't see, Michelle collapsed and died of dehydration. Six weeks later, at another wilderness camp a camper named Kristen Chase died of heatstroke after a forced march in 105 [degree] heat. In 1994, yet

another camper, Aaron Bacon, died of acute peritonitis compounded by neglect on another wilderness program.

Supporters of schools like Tranquility Bay say it's unfair to lump it with rogue institutions in which children are abused. Life at his school is not easy, Kay says, but no one is harmed. "The first days are very, very rough for the students," he concedes. "But after that they realize we are pretty good people." A 19-year-old said that after her parents sent her to Tranquility Bay, she began reversing her slide into drug use. "When I came here, I was a typical type of person that needed to be here," she says. "It was like I was wearing a sign that said, HELP ME." She was not an athlete when she arrived last March, but since then she has lost 40 lbs. and become a star soccer and basketball player. "You are stripped of your freedom here and take pride in it when you earn it back," she says.

David van Blarigan found another way to try to take back his freedom. When he got off the plane in Jamaica, the escort team from Tranquility Bay was late meeting him. That gave him time to call a friend and neighbor, Neil Aschemeyer, who is also an administrative-law judge. Aschemeyer got in touch with Robert Hutchins, head of the Alameda County district attorney's child-abduction unit. And Hutchins went to court to petition for David's release. For the moment, he isn't bringing criminal charges, but he regards the teenager's abduction as kidnapping. "When they sent this so-called escort service to pick up their boy, they took him against his will," Hutchins says. "That's kidnapping." Normally, a parent cannot kidnap his own child, but Hutchins argues that by giving Tranquility Bay the power to "restrain, control and detain" their son for a year, they effectively handed over custody of him, which, he says, California case law prohibits. Hutchins also contends that David's brief examination at Brightway was a sham and that his parents had already signed a yearlong contract with Tranquility Bay.

The Van Blarigans, for their part, say they were stunned to be hauled into court. "I was scratching my head," Jim van Blarigan says of the day Hutchins' office served him with papers. "I asked, 'What do you mean, kidnapping my [own] son?'" They love their son, they insist, and are only doing their duty. "We as parents made a choice to send our son to a boarding school for his benefit," says Sue van Blarigan. "We're being challenged on whether we have that right as parents." If David's suit prevails, he will be placed not with his parents but with the Alameda County family court. "Under the family code, minors have rights," says Hutchins. Of course, parents do too. The question before the judge is where a parent's rights end and a child's begin.

--Reported by Sylvester Monroe /Treasure Beach And James Willwerth /Los Angeles

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