

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Rocky Mountain Academy: Five other programs still running

Academy to close

Inability to find leadership blamed for school's demise

By Susan Drumheller
Staff writer

The former flagship of behavioral schools in North Idaho has hoisted the white flag.

Rocky Mountain Academy in Naples, Idaho, will close its doors Monday. About 20 staff members will be laid off and its remaining 19 students will disperse to other institutions or return home, according to CEDU Educational Services, which owns the school.

Rocky Mountain Academy, which opened in 1982, was the first CEDU emotional growth boarding school in North Idaho, and the catalyst to an industry of behavioral schools for troubled teens in the Panhandle and neighboring Sanders County, Montana. In the 1990s, the academy housed as many as 140 students from all over the nation. As recently as October, the

Continued: Academy/AS

tor in the closure of Rocky Mountain Academy, Andrick said. More than two dozen parents filed lawsuits against Rocky Mountain Academy and Boulder Creek Academy in October, alleging misconduct and breach-of-contract issues.

The plaintiffs allege, among other complaints, that one boy was forced to dig a grave and lie in a closed coffin in the grave while staff members tossed dirt on it. They also allege that staff members called students degrading names such as "whore" and "fatty," and failed to intervene when some students were hazed and beaten by other students.

At the time the lawsuit was filed, the plaintiff's attorney told The Spokesman-Review one concern was the "lack of direction."

"From our perspective, the problem was RMA (Rocky Mountain Academy) was going through school directors so quickly nothing has been consistent," attorney Todd Reed said.

Lon Woodbury, a former RMA staff member who now is a referral specialist for emotional growth programs, said that the academy's reputation was hurting, but not because of lawsuits.

"They seem to have lost themselves and haven't been able to turn it around," he said. "It's been a lack of leadership. They've had a couple three administrators and for one reason or another, it didn't work out."

In November 2002, CEDU paid a \$300,000 settlement in another lawsuit filed by the families of two former students who alleged that the staff at Northwest Academy was poorly trained and abusive. That lawsuit was filed following a riot at Northwest Academy in 1997.

As Northwest Academy's enrollment eclipsed that of Rocky Mountain Academy's, the schools swapped campuses. Northwest Academy is located on the original grounds of Rocky Mountain Academy in Paradise Valley, next to Boulder Creek Academy. Rocky Mountain Academy's cur-

rent site in Naples will close, but CEDU will maintain the grounds, Andrick said. It's too soon to say what its future use will be, she said.

Meanwhile, CEDU plans to establish a museum at the original campus, featuring old Rocky Mountain Academy newspapers, photographs and memorabilia, such as the banners each class made as they graduated from the school.

"It's helped a lot of families and students," Andrick said of the academy.

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SATURDAY
FEBRUARY 12, 2005

Mostly cloudy
High in mid-40s/A2

Submitted by
Sen Susai Schmidt

EXHIBIT 2
DATE 3/9/05
SB 101

is 15 miles away, so they don't get far. Last month, however, a 16-year-old girl who had arrived at Spring Creek in March hanged herself in a shower stall. The school says she is its first suicide.

What would make a parent send a child to such an isolated place, where he or she has to earn the right to use ketchup, sugar or salt, where calls home are rationed and where the smallest infraction can result in a stiff punishment? The Carbens say they did it because they had tried nearly everything else. John, their eldest son and the

observation at a local hospital and another stint in an outpatient therapeutic program. He was found to have bipolar disorder and was prescribed lithium, but he took the drug only sporadically. Desperate, the Carbens made the wrenching decision to send their son someplace that could impose the discipline they had been unable to give him at home. Mary found Spring Creek in a Google search for military schools. She and Randy were impressed by the "40 referrals" from ecstatic parents that the school sent them. "I didn't call any of them," Mary admits, a bit

months to earn his first phone call from home. But he eventually came around and completed the two seminars necessary to qualify for the visit from his family. Their first moments after the group hug were awkward but, haltingly at first, they began to talk. Mary and Randy told John about the arrival of his sister Bethany's new baby boy. He told them about the school. "I hear gunshots in the forest sometimes. It's a little scary," he said. "There are a lot of hunters around." Still, the Carbens liked what they saw, the polite way he spoke. Even the two piercings on his left ear had nearly closed up during his four months away.

Their impression of the school began to change, however, just before the family was about to depart for a trip outside the campus with their son. Strolling through the family clusters, Norum, the event's facilitator, stopped abruptly next to John. "Is that gum? There is no gum here," she scolded. Baffled by her response but determined to have a good time, the Carbens went on the visit, shopping at a Wal-Mart for clothes that John would need for Montana's next winter, dining at a Subway and driving through a bison preserve, content to be together even though they saw no bison. When they returned to the school, they learned that the chewing gum, which his father had given him, would cost John two progress levels and hundreds of hard-won points. It would take at least two months for him to make up the demotion. The Carbens knew about the school's no-excuses philosophy, but somehow seeing it in action was different. Said Randy: "They need to motivate and inspire them, not just break them down." He and Mary decided to pull John out immediately.

Back in Bridgeview, the Carbens are cautiously optimistic about their son's future. Despite his outrage over the pettiness of the gum incident, Randy acknowledges the program's benefits. "They've improved his attitude and sense of responsibility," he says. John says he plans to re-enroll at his old high school in January. "I learned a lot about how not to talk back to people and how to resolve conflicts," he says. Even his grandmother is impressed: "He seems like he grew up a lot." But taking nothing for granted, the Carbens are instituting their own tough-love rules at home. "We'll have a lot more boundaries," says Mary. In the meantime, they have confiscated John's car keys. ■



HOMECOMING John's grandmother Veronica Bernat says she can see the changes in him

third of their six children, was smoking pot, routinely ignoring curfews, lying about his whereabouts and erupting in anger whenever he was challenged. When his girlfriend gave birth to a baby boy, he dropped out of 11th grade to work but after just a month on the job was fired from his father's business for slacking off. He spent much of his time driving around town with similarly unambitious friends. Last year he crashed his prized Mustang after running a red light and seriously injured a woman in another car. Then in the spring he slugged his mother hard in the back for taking away his cell phone.

The Carbens had sent John to countless counseling sessions, two weeks of psychiatric

sheepishly. "I just trusted the program." The school's tuition was a real stretch for Randy, 44, who manages a demolition company, and Mary, 40, who supervises security guards at a chemical firm. But they agreed, says Randy, that "we would do whatever it takes for him to be there." They borrowed the money from Mary's mother and planned to pay her back by selling their three-bedroom home and moving in with her.

It took John practically all summer to get with the program at Spring Creek. He would get 25 points for good behavior (well on his way to earning brown sugar for his oatmeal as a reward) and then mouth off and return to square one. It took him three

“PROGRAMS THAT SEEK TO PREVENT VIOLENCE THROUGH FEAR AND TOUGH TREATMENT DO NOT WORK.” —NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH PANEL

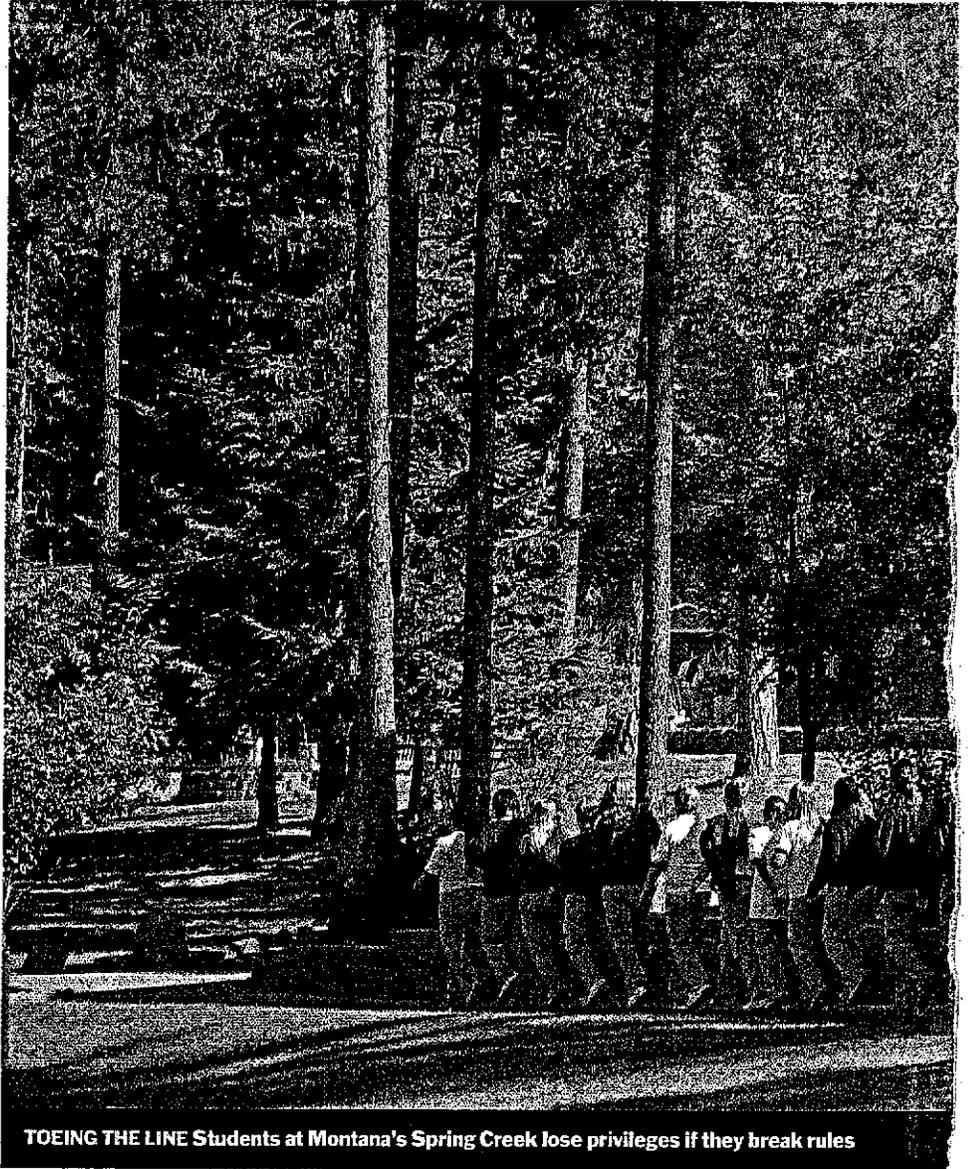
HOW TO SAVE A TRO

Tough-love academies march on, despite criticism. **TIME** looks inside one school's techniques

By **WENDY COLE THOMPSON FALLS**

WITH ITS SIMPLE, LOG-SIDED buildings spread out over 150 acres among the Ponderosa pines in a remote part of western Montana, Spring Creek Lodge Academy might pass as a rustic retreat for budget-minded travelers. But Mary and Randy Carben didn't make the trip there from their home in Bridgeview, Ill., for a vacation. They were at Spring Creek because it's where their son John had lived since the morning in June when the Carbens paid two handcuff-brandishing escorts to take their 17-year-old there. Despite its bucolic appearance, Spring Creek is a specialty boarding school that uses strict behavior-modification techniques to rehabilitate troubled kids. John, whose parents made the agonizing decision to commit him to the school after he punched his mother, had made progress since his arrival. And so, like the roughly 120 other parents who gathered last month in a barnlike room near the academy's entrance, the Carbens were waiting anxiously to see their child for the first time since they sent him away.

Debbie Norum, a program leader whose son went to a similar school, prepared the group for the visit. No gifts were allowed, she told them. "Your children need to understand that it is a privilege to live in your home and that *you* are the gift. This is not a vacation. This is the beginning of a lot of work." When the admonitions were finished, the lights were dimmed, and the syrupy melody of the Diana Ross ballad *If We Hold On Together* wafted through the room as Norum instructed the parents to form a circle, close their eyes and take deep breaths. "I'm inviting you to go back before the chaos, when you felt unconditional joy, when your child wanted to hug you. That



TOEING THE LINE Students at Montana's Spring Creek lose privileges if they break rules

child isn't gone," she assured them. As she spoke, 60 teens quietly filed into the room, eyes darting from face to face in search of familiar ones. "Now, parents, it's time to hold out your arms," Norum said. "Teens, see who's always held out their arms for you."

John's eyes filled with tears when he saw his mom and dad and clenched them in a long three-way embrace. Sobs and smiles filled the room as other happy parents delighted in the changes they saw in their children. "The kids who have done

well are so responsible and engaged. We see this as the road back for our family," said Tammy Swarbrick of Santa Clarita, Calif., who beamed as she and her husband prepared to see their son Daniel, 14.

Restoring family unity for households in which children have careened out of control is the express goal of Spring Creek and the six other behavior-modification programs affiliated with the nonprofit World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASPS) that oversee these for-profit juve-

*Distributed by
Sen Judd Schmitt*

UBLED KID?

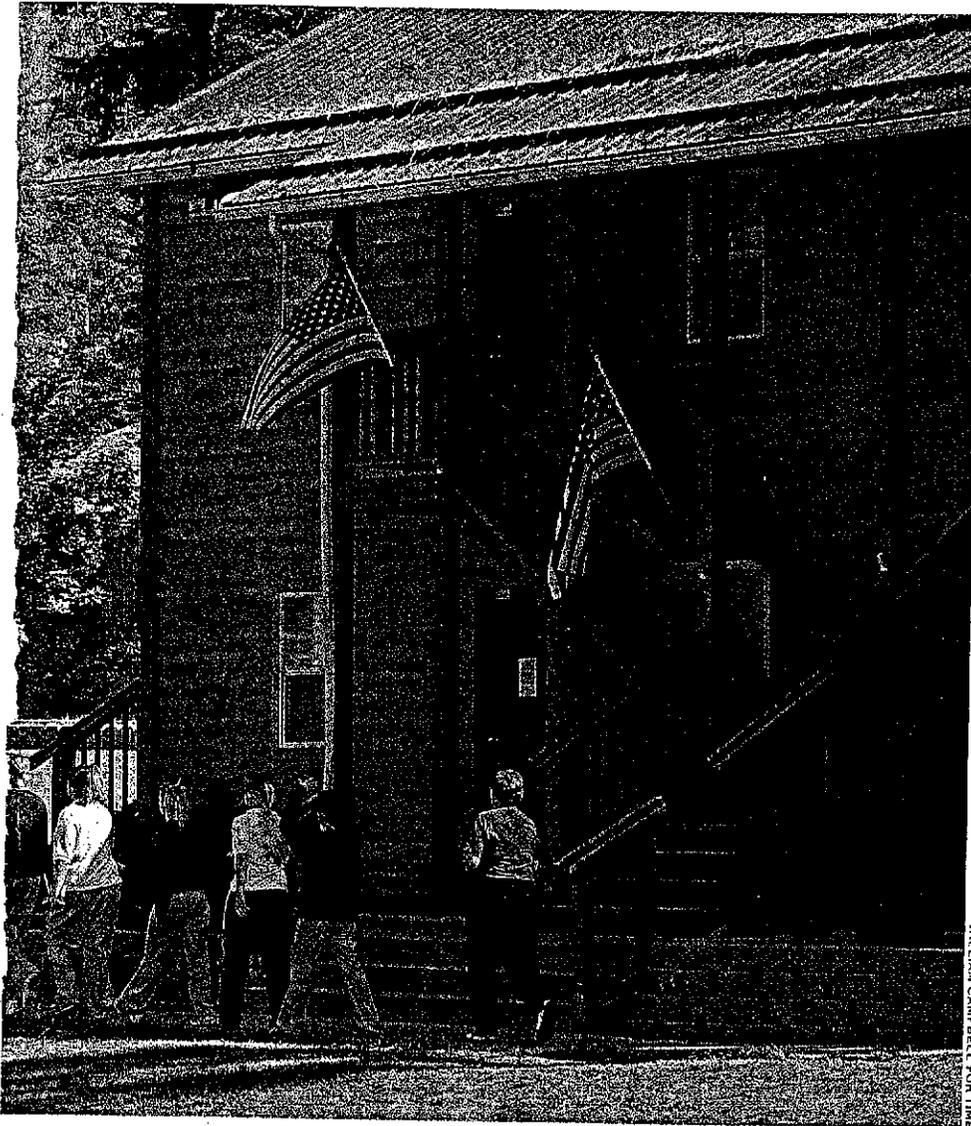
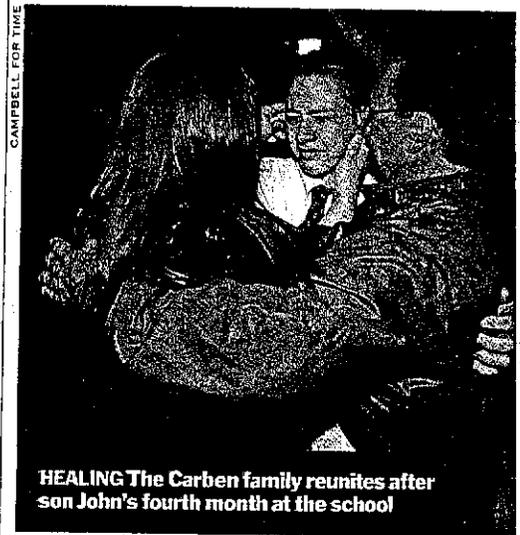


PHOTO BY WILLIAM CAMPBELL FOR TIME

es facing parents who send their children to them.

Opened in 1996, Spring Creek is the largest WWASPS affiliate, with about 600 teenagers in residence. It is owned and operated by twin brothers Cameron and Chaffin Pullan, 33. Neither Pullan is a college graduate or has any formal training in child development. Cameron worked as a YMCA day-care administrator, and Chaffin served as a residential manager for a WWASPS program in Utah before starting the school in Thompson Falls, Mont. But the brothers pride themselves on their self-taught proficiency in rehabilitating kids. "We help build confidence," says Chaffin, "through character building."

Boys and girls dressed in khakis and maroon sweaters walk silently across the campus in tidy lines. Speaking out of turn is forbidden. All activities are directed toward correcting old bad habits. Tony Robbins'



HEALING The Carben family reunites after son John's fourth month at the school

nile boot camps. They clearly fill a need; about 2,500 students are enrolled in WWASPS programs. Yet in recent years, most of the schools have come under attack on charges of abuse, including food and sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, alleged beatings and the deaths of at least two children. In September the association's Mexican affiliate Casa by the Sea, near Ensenada, was abruptly shut down after local authorities investigated the school for several cases of suspected abuse, which, WWASPS president Ken Kay said, were proved "unsubstantiated." Nevertheless, a panel sponsored

by the National Institutes of Health issued a study last month that called "get tough" programs "ineffective" and possibly harmful. Said the panel's report: "Programs that seek to prevent violence through fear and tough treatment do not work."

Yet the owners and managers of such schools profess a strong belief in what they do. Spring Creek allowed a TIME journalist to attend the parents' weekend and tour the campus, providing a rare glimpse into the daily regimens and conditions at one of these tough-love schools and an intimate look at the difficult choic-

self-improvement tapes are played during meals, and the teens spend hours charting their behavior. Instead of receiving classroom instruction, they work their way through a self-guided academic curriculum. Residents who follow the rules move through the program's progress levels and are granted more leniency; those who disobey receive demerits and lose privileges. About 20% of the students are on behavior-related medications, prescribed by a visiting psychiatrist. Licensed therapists are available, at a fee beyond the hefty \$3,085 a month it costs to keep a kid at Spring Creek. The average length of stay is a year, though the Pullans say it takes 18 months to complete the program. Every month, one or two kids try to run away. Although there are no fences, the school is surrounded by mountainous woods, and the nearest major road