

NOT A WILD CHILD

Surviving wilderness therapy

Parents have been sending their children to wilderness therapy camps in response to poor mental health or bad behavior, but the kids who have come out on the other side tell stories of abuse and humiliation

| ANNABEL CHIA

The second the sun peeked through the sky, 15-year-old Ali Weller was awoken. She was to pack up the flimsy tarp she had slept in and prepare to hike another grueling eight miles. She would continue this routine for the next two and a half months – minimal sleep, minimal food, and day-long hikes.

"Wilderness therapy was like I was homeless for two and a half months," Weller said.

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, wilderness therapy is a type of mental health treatment that provides physically challenging outdoor activities to prevent delinquent behavior. These

programs are a part of the troubled teen industry, which includes wilderness rehabilitation centers and residential treatment centers.

However, according to a US Government Accountability Office report, there have been over 1,500 staff members within the industry involved in cases of abuse up to 2005, the year they stopped tracking the data. Additionally, there have been at least 31 deaths since 1980, according to a New York Times article from 2001, and 9 more recorded deaths since then.

The most recent death was on Feb. 8, 2024, when a 12-year-old boy died a "suspicious" death at a North Carolina

Photo by **Avery Wong**



therapy camp, according to the Transylvania County Sheriff's Office.

Many parents send their teens to wilderness therapy to treat adolescent mental health issues or substance abuse when they feel professional help isn't enough. However, according to Catherine O'Sullivan, a former camper of wilderness therapy, many people stuck in these programs were sent if they were acting out. The age range of girls and boys was 12-17.

"You could be there for any reason; it's just a matter of your parents. There were a couple of girls who were probably acting out because of adoption trauma. I knew girls there who had been sexually assaulted and were acting out because of that" O'Sullivan said. "I never did drugs or drank alcohol, but when parents see their teenagers acting out in a way that they're not comfortable with, they get scared."

O'Sullivan is a survivor of the troubled teen industry.

"It was just like you hear with everybody else's story, it was absolutely terrible," O'Sullivan said. "The staff would completely publicly humiliate you, they would make you do degrading stuff, and we had food held against us."

O'Sullivan said in her experience, right from the beginning, her freedom was virtually stripped away from her for the sake of treatment.

"When I arrived, I was dragged in there to get strip searched. You take a drug and a pregnancy test, and if you don't comply, you'll get restrained, and eventually, you'll just end up having to do it," O'Sullivan said. "After that, they give

you boots two sizes too big without laces so you can't run away. You get wiped down by a staff member with a cloth, and they put it in a little ziplock bag so you can be tracked by the German shepherds they had."

Yet, this treatment did not benefit her in any way.

"The entire time that I was at Ironwood in Maine at this facility, and I got no therapeutic help. A lot of the staff there weren't even licensed therapists," O'Sullivan said.

Every wilderness therapy program looks a bit different. O'Sullivan said her daily routine consisted of manual labor to maintain the facility, five-minute hygiene periods, and homeschooling that did not even provide an adequate education.

She was there for 11 months.

For Weller and Catherine C.*, their experiences consisted more of physical hiking in the wilderness of Utah, and they were there for about 90 days.

"We did a lot of hiking because it's a nomadic program style. We had a backpack that we carried around with us every day. Sometimes, it would be miserable hikes of up to upwards of four miles with a 50-pound pack on your back," Catherine said.

Often, the parents of these teens were also unaware of how intense the programs were.

"These programs have websites and very convincing people talk to the parents — that's part of their whole tactic

RESOURCES:

Some survivors of wilderness therapy and the troubled teen industry suffered through sexual and physical abuse. Many develop poor mental health or PTSD. Please call a hotline or 911 if you or someone you know needs assistance.

Talk to a Childhelp counselor about abuse:

800-422-4453

National Sexual Assault Hotline:

1-800-656-4673

of deceptive marketing because when you're a parent that is fearful of their child making a wrong decision in their life or self-harming, and you have someone offering a soft ear, you're willing to do anything," O'Sullivan said.

In general, the kids don't even know they're being sent to the wilderness beforehand. Weller and O'Sullivan were both fully unaware. In more difficult situations, Catherine said the teens will be sent in extreme ways called "gooning," where they are kidnapped in the middle of the night in their home by the program staff.

"My roommate at a center was gooned. In the middle of the night, they came and got her," Catherine said. "It's more of an intervention step and because she was in such a bad state, she wouldn't have gone on her own."

Wilderness therapy has left its marks on all survivors in some way or another, whether that be physically or mentally.

"I still keep in contact with some people I went with, and we have physical problems coming out of this. My teeth are almost destroyed because of the lack of oral hygiene, since we weren't given time to

brush our teeth or use mouthwash," O'Sullivan said. "Many of us have mental trauma and were sexually assaulted there. There were a lot of challenges coming back into society because you just don't know how to act."

Weller said the experience had left lasting mental impacts on her life.

"I couldn't be outside for a year, and I couldn't be around fire," Weller said. "I have PTSD and had really bad nightmares for a while about being sent back and having to live out there again."

Those who underwent the abuse are working to speak up against these programs. Recently, *Hell Camp: Teen Nightmare* was released on Netflix to reveal the systemic issues within the troubled teen industry. Notable figures like Paris Hilton advocated on behalf of the industry survivors, and they are all working to share a similar message.

"The programs are child abuse, and that is something I will say until the day I die," Weller said.

*In accordance with Carlmont's Anonymous Sourcing Policy, the name of the source has been shortened to preserve the subject's anonymity and prevent any foreseeable threat to the source's safety.



A group of kids in a wilderness therapy camp sit in a circle during a hike. Many children in wilderness therapy camps don't see their families for months. Photos courtesy of **Catherine C.**