

BRIAN ROSS

Mr. and Mrs. Bacon, you've heard the two other parents. I take it you've had a similar expectation that this program might do some good?

SALLY BACON

Absolutely.

BRIAN ROSS

What were you hoping would come out of it? Why did you decide to go with kind of this wilderness idea?

SALLY BACON

For Aaron, I thought that North Star¹ would be just a perfect solution because one of their things with their program is they had to write in a journal. Aaron was a poet and a writer and that was his life. The way they sold the program to me was the kids hike uh, eight to ten miles a day, and then they write in their journals for a while, and they sit around the campfire and they discuss their issues. I almost thought Aaron was going to think he was on vacation. I mean I was convinced that this was really going to be a great experience for him.

BRIAN ROSS

What happened?

¹ *North Star* - After an investigation into the program, prosecutors filed criminal charges against the program's owners and several staff members. Five pleaded guilty to negligent homicide and other charges; one went to trial and was convicted on an abuse charge. A civil suit by the parents was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount.

SALLY BACON

Aaron began to complain of stomach pain a week after he was in the program. I called there several times a week to check up on Aaron, I was never allowed to speak to him. Never once did they disclose to me there was any type of problem. They called him a faker and a slacker. He was in so much pain that he could not carry his pack so they humiliated him, called him names, and decided that since he couldn't carry his pack... he would go without food. So Aaron went without food fourteen of the twenty days that he hiked. They made him hike without pants in front of the other kids. He had lost control of his bodily functions two weeks before he died. He documented his own death in his journal. He begged for help. He even said, look if you think I'm faking it, get me to a doctor and he'll punish me accordingly. There are photographs of Aaron right before he died, I mean he was emaciated. I think the worst thing that North Star did to us as a family is when they called and said Aaron was down and they couldn't get a pulse. It never occurred to me he was dead because I sent this healthy, sixteen year old boy. When we went to see his body, and I think I'm going to hold my son and see my son, he was completely emaciated. I did not recognize him, he looked like a skeleton. And he had sores all from his groin down to his ankles from, because he had been going to the bathroom all over himself.

BOB BACON

I think to understand an important commonality between what happened to all of our children is that they were presumed to be liars and manipulators. This industry has an unwritten policy that they're dealing with troubled teens and therefore troubled teens are by definition liars and manipulators whose spirits need to be broken so that they can be remolded, and whatever treatment therapy, education, behavioral modification, whatever it is that they seem to be selling first starts with the presumption that these kids lie.

BRIAN ROSS

And in the end what did you discovered was happening with him?

SALLY BACON

When we saw his body I obviously knew something horrible had happened to him. And we demanded our own autopsy to be done. We went to Utah and spoke with the police, and they had gathered all the journals, and this tale began to unfold. We found out that [...] who was going to be sitting around the campfire with them wasn't even a doctor and had only seen Aaron once. It was a big pack of lies. We would not have sent our son to a boot camp. We weren't looking for a boot camp.

BOB BACON

We wanted to speak to the counselors, the so-called counselors. These were just kids, apparently far more troubled than our son who are being paid minimum wage to just be out in the field with them. There were absolutely no qualifications for them to be called counselors or anything like that. But they immediately went into a defensive mode and we couldn't get any information out of anyone. It is simply unbelievable that this could take place in a civilized country.

BRIAN ROSS

And you think that the whole notion of these wilderness camps, is a flawed notion?

SALLY BACON

You can do tough love as a parent because you love the child. They can do tough, they can't do love.

BOB BACON

I think until they are recognized for what they are- a private capitalistic enterprise, then they're going to continue to be fundamentally flawed. They've positioned themselves very carefully between the cracks of regulation. Those states that do have licensing don't have the personnel or the financial resources to provide the oversight necessary for those regulations to be effective. It's an industry that's exploiting American families, exploiting American children.