

BRIAN ROSS

Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, you took your son Ryan to this outdoor program in West Virginia knowing that he had tried suicide twice. What were your expectations?

PAUL LEWIS

Ryan had been struggling for a couple years and wanted to do whatever he could to improve the quality of his life. Ryan was actually involved in the decision to go to Alldredge Academy¹. We had shared all the information we had with him, and he agreed that it appeared to be a good opportunity for him. He was a very outdoor kid, he was a backpacker, he was a hiker, he did an awful lot of outdoor sports. So for him this seemed to be a natural place for him to be. There was supposed to be an education component that allowed him to finish eighth grade. And our expectations were that this would be a program that would help him develop strategies to deal with depression, and also that would put him in a very safe environment that he would be supervised very closely.

BRIAN ROSS

Was it clear to you the program knew that he might be

¹ Alldredge Academy - Following a grand jury indictment, one of the program's owners, L. Jay Mitchell, paid a \$5,000 fee and entered a no contest plea in order to dismiss a charge of child neglect resulting in death, according to the GAO. The owners later admitted personal responsibility for Ryan's death, as part of a \$1.2 million civil settlement with Ryan's family. The program is open and operating.

suicidal?

PAUL LEWIS

Oh absolutely. We provided information on our application. Ryan's psychiatrist had actually spoken to the admissions people there and given them a very clear profile of Ryan with the specific instructions that he needed to be monitored very closely, and we were assured repeatedly that Ryan would be safe.

BRIAN ROSS

And then what happened?

PAUL LEWIS

Uh, we enrolled Ryan in February of 2001, and dropped him off. We drove down together and dropped him off in West Virginia. Just as with Erica, Ryan struggled on the trail. He fell a lot. He had to have part of his load shared by other kids which was very embarrassing to Ryan.

About three or four days into the program, he told one of the adults that he was with that this was not the program my parents thought it was. So he knew that things weren't right. On the sixth day of the program, he took a pocket knife that had been issued to him and he slashed his left forearm four times, and waved to them and said take this away from me before I hurt myself anymore.

[Ryan said] "I can't take this anymore. I want to call my mom and I want to go home." One of the counselors spoke to him for a few minutes. The counselor told him that a therapist would be out to talk to him, and then gave

him the knife back. The next day the owner of the program, L. Jay Mitchell² and the director of the Wilderness Program, John Weston White³, came out to see the group. They were told about Ryan's cry for help the previous night. And they decided that this is just manipulation, and that if they addressed it, it would foster future behavior like this so they made a conscious decision to ignore our son's desperate cry for help, and did nothing to protect him. And I think at that point, it became very clear to Ryan that there was no help and no hope for him. And that night approximately 7:30 in the evening, he walked off by himself to his camp site and he hung himself.

BRIAN ROSS

What did you learn later about what procedures they had for addressing this kind of thing and uh, the role of the therapist?

PAUL LEWIS

Well first of all none of the people there were legitimate therapists. There was a man that said he was a licensed clinical social worker, but he didn't get his license in West

² L. Jay Mitchell - under an agreement with the state of West Virginia, Mitchell is barred from working as a manager, officer, board member or staff member of the academy, which still operates.

³ John Weston White - the state dropped a charge against him as part of Mitchell's plea deal.

Virginia until 2003. Ryan died in 2001. They had another man called Dr. [...] that was listed as having a Masters and a Ph.D. in family counseling. Turns out, it's not from an accredited school that he got it from. And neither one of them were involved in any type of dealings with Ryan. The man that was in charge and the man that owned the program, L. Jay Mitchell, who is by trade, a lawyer, was the one who was making all the decisions.

BRIAN ROSS

For you and, and for your wife, it must have been devastating to get that call.

PAUL LEWIS

It's the worst nightmare for a parent. Ryan died approximately 7:30 in the evening, they didn't call us for almost four hours. And when they did call us, they identified themselves. He told us that Ryan had hung himself, and that it had caught them completely by surprise. He said he had no idea he was in trouble and there was nothing they could have done.