Loving Them to Death: The Story of One Teenager's 'Wilderness Experience'

By Jon Krakauer
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It's the "wilderness experience" at its most extreme--rehabilitation of wayward teenagers delivered with the in-your-face discipline of a boot camp. But in the past five years at least ten young people have died, the victims of alleged beatings, starvation, and emotional stress, and the so-called therapy is looking more like murder.

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unpaid corporate taxes. By early 1990 Cartisano was embroiled in numerous lawsuits filed by creditors and disgruntled clients, and the state of Utah was investigating him on several fronts.

At the same time, charges started flying that Challenger staff physically abused their students. According to Max Jackson, former sheriff of Kane County (Challenger ran its courses in Kane and adjacent Garfield County), "We pulled one kid from the program who was so bruised and scarred he looked like he'd been at Auschwitz. When another kid tried to run away, Cartisano got in a helicopter, found him, flew him up to the top of a mesa, and slugged him in the gut a couple of times."

Although Cartisano was married and had four children, Jackson alleges that "at one point he struck up a romance with the mother of one of his students. He talked her into giving him her Visa Gold card with no credit limit. He ran up $65,000 in charges before she realized she'd been had."

"Steve is real smooth, real slick," Jackson reflects. "He likes to hear himself talk. But I'll tell you what: I went to the FBI Academy a couple years back, and we studied the typology of sociopaths. Out of a list of 20 characteristics, Steve was a perfect match with about 19 of 'em."

Today, Cartisano dismisses his legal problems, saying Jackson and the state were "out to get me. The charges were all based on allegations of messed-up kids who were pathological liars and master manipulators. They knew that the fastest way out of the program was to accuse the staff of abusing them." Unbowed, he still feels as defiant as he did in 1989, when he proclaimed, "There's no way on this earth I'll ever allow any petty bureaucrat to take over this program and turn it from a survival camp into a summer camp. They're going to find out they're messing with the wrong guy."

As Cartisano's financial and legal difficulties mounted, the Challenger admissions director, a woman named Gayle Palmer, quit to start her own wilderness-therapy company, Summit Quest Inc. Palmer knew little about the backcountry or therapy beyond what she'd gleaned from pitching Challenger courses. "But Palmer got tired of working for Steve," says Doug Nelson, "so she hung out her shingle."

Five students were enrolled in the inaugural Summit Quest course, which cost $13,900 for 63 days. Palmer sent the group to the arid Shivwits Plateau, near the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, supervised by two young counselors who were paid minimum wage. During the first several days, Michelle Sutton--a pretty 15-year-old who had enrolled voluntarily to regain self-esteem after an alleged date rape--complained repeatedly of exhaustion, sunburn, and nausea. As the group hiked through the desert, she vomited up most of the water she tried to drink and pleaded that she could not go on. According to counselors' field reports gathered by state and federal investigators, the lead counselor had been ordered to ignore such talk as manipulative behavior. "You have been sloughing off," she told Sutton. "You are now being warned."

On May 9, 1990, during an ascent of 7,072-foot Mount Dellenbaugh, Sutton's speech became slurred, she cried out that she couldn't see, and then she lost consciousness and died. Palmer insisted to officials that Sutton had succumbed to a drug overdose, but the coroner found no drugs in her system and determined the cause of death to be dehydration. Although no charges were filed, Cartisano was quick to lash out at Palmer in the media, accusing her of criminal incompetence. "At Challenger," he gloated, "a tragedy like the one that killed Michelle Sutton could never happen."

Just six weeks later, it did. On June 27, 1990, four days after enrolling at Challenger, a 16-year-old Florida girl named Kristin Chase collapsed after a five-mile hike in near-100-degree heat. Once again, her counselors had thought she was faking when she complained. The coroner attributed her death to hyperthermia and dehydration--the most basic and preventable hazards of desert travel.

After Chase's death, the state of Utah charged Cartisano and Lance Jaggar with negligent homicide and nine counts of child abuse involving Chase and other Challenger students. Jaggar, however, cut a deal with the Kane County prosecutor: He agreed to testify against Cartisano in return for having all charges against him dismissed.

The trial was held in Kanab, Utah, in September 1991. Jaggar and other Challenger employees testified under oath about beatings and abusive treatment. But after five days of testimony, a mistrial was called over a technicality. In a glaring mistake, the judge had neglected to read the charges to the jury at the trial's outset.

The case was retried eight months later in the Salt Lake City area. This time, says Max Jackson, "Cartisano brought in a high-dollar attorney from New York. And then, in the middle of everything, the prosecuting attorney started drinking real heavy, and I had to arrest him for DUI. The upshot was, Cartisano got off scot-free." Afterward, one jury member explained the verdict: "We weren't saying Cartisano was innocent, we were saying the prosecution didn't prove he was guilty.... We all felt like the program had some real problems."

In the aftermath, the state of Utah resolved to monitor the wilderness-therapy industry more closely. Many concerned individuals, including Doug Nelson and Larry Wells, came forward to help draft a set of strict regulations. Prominent among the would-be reformers were Lance Jaggar and Bill Henry, who zealously decried the abuses of their former employer. In short order, they submitted the necessary paperwork to start their own wilderness-therapy program and in October 1990 were granted a license to operate in Utah. Three months after the death of Kristin Chase, the two individuals considered by many to be most responsible for the tragedy were back in business. They called their new enterprise North Star Expeditions Inc.

"That's a real touchy subject around here," says a waitress at the Circle D Restaurant in Escalante, when asked about Bacon. "He was a drug addict, his parents was drug addicts, and now that he's dead they want to blame somebody, so they're trying to wreck the lives of the folks who was trying to help him."

Rising from the wind-scoured slickrock of southern Utah, Escalante (pronounced "es-ka-LANT") is a characteristically insular Mormon outpost. Though it's seen an influx of California retirees in recent years--raising the population to about 800--townsfolk merely tolerate the intruders; they don't welcome them. Likewise, when Steve Cartisano brought Challenger to Escalante in 1988, locals were initially wary. But it was a good Mormon enterprise, and field director Lance Jaggar married a local girl, Barb Reynolds, from nearby Tropic. Eventually it gained a measure of acceptance.

By the time Challenger, minus Cartisano, had turned into North Star (the name changed, but most of the key personnel remained the same), the company was tightly woven into the civic fabric. When felony charges were filed in connection with Bacon's death, the local Mormon church provided financial assistance to some of the defendants, and Escalante closed ranks to support the beleaguered corporation.

Bacon arrived on March 1, 1994, in the custody of Lance and Barbara Jaggar. He was strip-searched, issued cheap boots and a backpack, and driven into the desert to begin a ten-day acclimatization process. Escalante lies 5,600 feet above sea level, and March here is harsh and wintry. The first backcountry entry in Bacon's journal reads, "I've been shaking from the cold since I got here. My body being used to the weather in Phoenix is going into shock. I feel like I'm going to die.... I am scared. I don't know when I can talk or if I can."

After the 1990 deaths, Utah enacted strict regulations for wilderness therapy. A student's backpack was not to weigh more than 30 percent of his or her body weight. Hiking was never to exceed "the physical capability of the weakest member of the group," and each student was to receive a minimum of 1,800 calories per day. A single violation of these or other rules was grounds to suspend an operator's license.

Responsibility for enforcing the regulations, however, fell to a lone civil servant, Ken Stettler, who was supposed to monitor more than 100 youth-treatment companies statewide. In practice, it was impossible for him to ride herd on so many programs, and North Star was among those that escaped close scrutiny. Stettler, a devoted Mormon, knew Jaggar and Henry well and says that he trusted them, as fellow Saints, implicitly. After Bacon's death, Stettler's confidence in Jaggar and Henry remained steadfast. He quickly cleared North Star of any wrongdoing and allowed the program to stay in business--which it did for six months, until the state of Utah filed criminal charges in October 1994.

In reality, North Star operated as Challenger had. Food was strictly rationed. Students were deprived of provisions, sleeping bags, and shelter as a matter of course. The counselors were poorly paid and had little training. There was one credentialed therapist on the payroll--David Jensen, a clinical social worker--but Bacon saw him only once. Therapy at North Star consisted almost exclusively of intimidation, deprivation, and military-style discipline.

On March 7, Bacon was driven into town, where his hair was sheared and he was examined by a physician assistant. He weighed 131 pounds. Blood and urine tests indicated that he'd been using nothing stronger than marijuana. A day later, in a letter to his parents, Bacon wrote, "I'm trying to work this program as well as I can, but...I can't believe you want me believing this stuff.... I've been told that 'all therapists, counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists are quacks.' I've been lectured on the stupidity of believing in them.... I miss you mom, and you dad.... As I'm writing this and thinking about you all at home I can't help but cry."

On March 11, Bacon's group of six students and two counselors headed into a labyrinth of spectacular sandstone canyons for a three-week backcountry trek. For the first two days the students were deprived of food to "cleanse the toxins from their bodies," as North Star literature put it. From a picture of the trip that emerges from his journal, investigators' records, and testimony at a preliminary hearing held last May in Panguitch, it's clear that Bacon quickly ran into problems. His feet blistered, he fell repeatedly, and he had great difficulty getting back on his feet under his 45-pound load. While ascending an eerie, crepuscular defile called Little Death Hollow, he slipped and bashed his chin on the slickrock. On March 15, too tired to carry his pack, he abandoned it. Because it held all his rations, he was forced to go without food until he retrieved the pack on the return trip two days later.

Meanwhile, other counselors and students allegedly taunted Bacon, asking if he were "homosexual." On March 20, a counselor named Brent Brewer took away Bacon's sleeping bag as punishment and replaced it with a thin blanket. The next day, Bacon wrote that he hadn't eaten in 24 hours: "I feel like I am losing control of my body. I've peed my pants every night for the past three nights and today when we started our little hike I took a dump in my pants, I didn't even feel it coming, it just happened.... All the other students started to laugh.... I've been telling [the staff] that I'm sick for a while and they say I'm faking it."

It's unclear when Bacon developed the ulcer that killed him, but by this point the stress of the course had severely exacerbated the ailment. The next evening he wrote, "The cold and the wind is making me freeze up.... All I can think about is cold and pain.... I miss my family so much. My hands, my lips and face are dead."

Bacon's journal ends there, on March 22, but his travails continued. By this time, say witnesses, Bacon was too exhausted to keep up, and he abandoned his pack a second time as the students commenced a grueling climb to the summit of the Kaiparowits Plateau. He went without food, a blanket, or a sleeping bag from March 22 to March 25 on the 7,000-foot mesa, where nightly temperatures dropped below 22 degrees Fahrenheit.

On the 25th, Lance Jaggar and Bill Henry met Bacon's group on the Kaiparowits. According to witnesses, they gave him a blanket to replace his sleeping bag but took his cup away because "he wasn't keeping it clean." Jaggar also reiterated to the counselors that Bacon was "a whiner and a faker."

Bacon had been unable to control his bladder and bowels for many days, and on March 29 he was forced to hike without pants. The group descended from the high country and retrieved Bacon's pack, but Bacon was too weak to carry it. "The counselor got mad," recalls John Kulluk, one of the students, "and the rest of us had to carry it for him. Then, about a mile from camp, Aaron fell and couldn't get up, so we had to carry him, too. While we were carrying him he puked all over Travis [another student] and talked about seeing purple stars and a purple sky, like he was delirious."

That night, says Kulluk, Bacon complained again of being seriously ill, "but the staff just kind of blew him off and called him a faker. They yelled, 'Get off your lazy butt and go collect wood.' The next morning Craig [Fisher, a counselor] got really mad, grabbed Aaron by the shirt, and pulled him to the latrine."

In a rock-strewn Arizona canyon 300 miles south of where Bacon died, a teenage girl with unshaved legs and a dirty face kneels in the sand. Using a crude bow drill to start a fire on a block of cottonwood, she produces a tiny coal, which she quickly coaxes into a blaze. "Nice fire, Angie!" proclaims Cheri, who crouches nearby kneading cornmeal and water into a wretched pancake. "Too bad we don't have something better to cook on it than this crap."

Cheri, Angie, and another teenager named Annie are seven weeks into the $15,000 wilderness course run by the Anasazi Foundation. Like most kids who wind up in such programs, they're here for the typical sins of adolescence: drinking, drugs, sex, shoplifting. "To get me here, my parents kidnapped me," complains Cheri, a petite 16-year-old from Boston. "It was sick."

Having learned about wilderness therapy in the abstract, I'm spending a few days with Anasazi to see how it works in practice. Anasazi, of course, isn't North Star. It has a reputation as one of the safest programs in the nation, and its style couldn't be more different. The night before, two boys from a nearby Anasazi group ran away. Counselors discovered the escape half an hour later, picked up the kids' trail, and caught up with them shortly after dawn. At North Star, the fugitives might have received severe punishment. Anasazi's counselors took another approach.

"Where you guys headed?" they calmly inquired of the runners. After suggesting that the kids return to the group, they added, "Of course, if you'd rather keep going in this direction, that's cool. We'll just tag along with you to make sure you're safe, OK?" The boys sheepishly confessed that they were tired and hungry and wanted to go back.

Anasazi's methods are rooted in the Mormon principle of "agency," the idea that "God will force no man to heaven." According to this precept, righteous behavior cannot be coerced. It has to be a conscious choice. "We don't lay a lot of rules on these kids," explains Elizabeth Peterson, an irrepressibly upbeat 20-year-old counselor. "If they insist on smuggling in contraband, they can, but we explain that they won't start to make progress until they choose to turn over their drugs. The whole program is based on trust. Without it, there's really no point in even doing this."

This approach works at Anasazi in part because Anasazi turns away students who might not be disqualified from other programs: kids who exhibit violent behavior, for example. Still, many of Anasazi's clients are deeply troubled, and Anasazi is no holiday. Students march hard, sleep on rocky ground, and once a week receive a 15-pound food bag containing staples like cornmeal, flour, and lentils. The daily ration of 2,000 calories is extremely lean, and if a kid consumes it early in the week, he or she has to subsist on wild plants, lizards, and bugs. The Anasazi students I met looked healthy, but food monopolized their fantasies.

At least from what I could see, the Anasazi staff manages to impose discipline without making threats. Larry Dean Olsen, Anasazi's founder, calls intimidation "Satan's tactic." There are, he says, "only two ways you can help a kid. Love him and love him some more. You've got to guide him gently and prayerfully to the right path." As Olsen's words suggest, religious dogma is an integral part of the Anasazi curriculum. While such indoctrination raises questions about the program's effectiveness in treating kids from outside the Mormon community, on the surface, at least, Anasazi appears to work.

"For the first week, I couldn't stand being here," says Cheri, who is not a Mormon, as she warms her grimy hands by the fire. "I hated everything about Anasazi. But now I'm grateful that my parents made me come. This is the best thing that's ever happened to me. I've changed so much out here."

"It's true," Angie pipes in. "You should have seen Cheri when she first arrived. She cried all the time. She was mean to everybody. Now look at her: She's happy. The rest of us can actually stand to be around her. She's really changed. All three of us have." After speaking candidly and at length with four groups of Anasazi students out of earshot of their counselors, it seemed to me that the program changed many of the kids in dramatic ways. But I was less convinced that the changes will stick. A 1991 survey of Anasazi graduates found that 73 percent had managed to stay away from drugs and alcohol a year after completing the program--an impressive number, but as psychologists are quick to point out, this kind of self-reporting results in notoriously unreliable data. Beyond such isolated studies, no wilderness-therapy program has ever been the subject of scientifically rigorous, long-term analysis.

All of which, of course, makes a parent's decision to choose this method of treatment a tough judgment call. During a long talk with a group of parents who were on their way to meet their kids at the conclusion of an Anasazi trip, I asked about motives. In part, their answers and attitudes were a reminder that troubled kids often come from troubled homes. (After hearing one parent, a self-important doctor from Kansas, pontificate smugly for hours, I wondered whether dad, not junior, should have been packed off to boot camp.) But while listening to every parent in the vehicle recount tales of children lost to drugs and crime, I wondered what I would do under similar circumstances. Like as not, I'd scrape up the money and put my kid in Anasazi. Given the alternative, what parent wouldn't at least consider it?

This reality underscores one of the biggest problems with wilderness therapy: Parents who choose it are too often in the grip of fear and guilt and unfiltered emotion--poor conditions for making such a critical choice. As the Anasazi van lurched down the road, the subject of parental responsibility in these decisions--and Bacon's death--came up. "I would never intentionally send my boy to an abusive outfit like North Star," offered one father, "but I realize that every program has risks."

"I guess there are some bad things that could happen out there in the desert," a mother said. "But whatever my daughter is doing, I'm sure she's a whole lot safer than she would be in town, drinking and taking drugs with her friends."

This is what Sally Bacon believed, of course, but she warns today that matters aren't quite so simple. "I am not an unsophisticated person," she says with conviction during a long conversation about the decision to send Aaron to North Star. "Bob and I were careful. We asked all the questions you're supposed to ask." Her eyes brim with tears. "Of all the treatment centers in America, why did I pick this one? How could I have been so wrong?" "I think about what happened to Aaron every day," Mike Hill whispers in a voice still thick with regret more than a year after Bacon's death. A soft-spoken, baby-faced Apache raised on the San Carlos Indian Reservation in Arizona, Hill will be a crucial witness for the state of Utah in the Bacon case. The defense will attempt to discredit Hill's testimony by attacking his character, pointing out that he has a history of drug abuse and that, as a counselor at North Star, he was investigated for having a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old student. Hill says that none of these old allegations change what he saw and heard.

In September 1993, Hill was 19 years old and "hanging out on the res" when he and his best friend, Sonny Duncan, were offered employment at North Star. "There was no job interview or anything," Hill recalls. "I didn't really have any qualifications. They just hired us on the spot and drove us up to Utah. I figured we would just chill out, spend a lot of time sitting around the campfire. Then we got there and learned different." In Escalante, Hill and Duncan were rushed out to the field and, without training or supervision, left in charge of five students.

"My third day there," Hill says, "Horsehair [Lance Jaggar] came out and started yelling, shoving kids around, grabbing them in the crotch, poking them in the chest. He told one kid, 'Know what's gonna happen to you if you keep smoking pot? You're going to wind up in prison where big black bubbas like to fuck little white boys like you.' These same people were trying to convert me to Mormonism, preaching about righteousness--and here they were doing this kind of stuff?"

Bacon wasn't in Hill's group, but they crossed paths now and then, and Hill says he liked the skinny kid from Phoenix. After not seeing Bacon for a couple of weeks, he encountered his group at the mouth of Right Hand Canyon on March 30 and was shocked by what he saw: "He looked anorexic-like, with bones showing everywhere."

By this time Sonny Duncan, who was assigned to Bacon's group, was concerned enough to radio the North Star office and request that Georgette Costigan, a staffer and a certified emergency medical technician, come out and look at him. She talked to Bacon briefly, gave him a piece of cheese, and then drove back to town without checking any of his vital signs, despite the fact that he weighed only 108 pounds.

On March 31, because Bacon could no longer walk more than a dozen yards without collapsing, it was decided that he should be taken into Escalante--not for medical treatment, but to start the course over again. Duncan radioed Hill, who was camped nearby, and asked him to look after Bacon until a truck arrived to take him to town.

It was a cold, windy morning. At 10:30, Hill walked over to Duncan's camp and found Bacon sitting on a pit latrine. When he tried to stand, says Hill, "he started staggering like a drunk." Duncan taunted and mocked Bacon and told Hill that he had been starving himself because he wanted to die. Hill pulled up the boy's pants and started leading him back to his own camp, but Bacon couldn't walk, so Hill instructed other students to carry him.

In camp, Hill had Bacon lie down under a juniper and took two photographs of the emaciated youth. "Since you're trying to starve yourself," he admonished, "I'm going to show these pictures to your parents so they'll know what you're up to."

Bacon replied that he couldn't hear Hill and that his vision had become a white blur. "I don't want to die, sir," he protested, adding that he had extreme pain in his lower abdomen. As it dawned on him that something was seriously wrong, Hill tried to take Bacon's temperature, but the thermometer in the first-aid kit was broken. He then pulled a pouch of ochre-colored Apache "medicine" powder from his pocket, sprinkled it around Bacon, and told the other students to start praying.

According to Dr. Todd Grey, the forensic pathologist who headed the state's medical investigation of Bacon's death, the contents of the boy's intestine by this time had probably been leaking into his abdominal cavity for 24 hours or more. "He would have had low blood pressure, a fever, an elevated pulse rate, and exquisite tenderness of the abdomen," Grey says. "Any reasonable person should have realized that Aaron Bacon was in need of immediate medical attention."

But when Eric Henry, Bill Henry's 20-year-old son, drove out that afternoon, North Star still had no intention of taking Bacon to a doctor. A few minutes before arriving, Henry radioed that Hill and the others should "get the faker ready" to be transported to Escalante to join a new group and start the course over. Unable to make it to the North Star truck on his own, Bacon was picked up and placed in the backseat by Henry. Then, for the next 20 minutes, Henry and the other counselors stood outside the vehicle, chatting and making fun of Bacon's condition.

At 2:54 P.M., the counselors heard Bacon banging his head repeatedly against the truck's rear window, so Hill went to check on him. The banging stopped. A minute later, Hill recalls, "I went to the passenger side of the truck to check again, and Aaron was just sitting there, staring off into space. His eyes were blank. I got really scared then. I checked his pulse and felt nothing."

Bacon was pulled from the truck, and Hill began performing CPR while Henry frantically radioed for medical assistance. "Everyone was freaking out," says Hill. "Someone kept screaming, 'Oh, shit! Oh, shit!'" Georgette Costigan arrived with her EMT kit about 30 minutes later, followed shortly by the Escalante ambulance team and a medical helicopter from Page. They were all too late. Aaron Bacon was already dead.

When asked about the deaths at Challenger, North Star, and other programs, Steve Cartisano calmly answers that because wilderness therapy saves the lives of so many children, an occasional fatality is a regrettable but justifiable cost of doing business. He calls it the "window of loss."

"Jaggar and Henry apparently share this view," muses Bob Bacon, "and I find that despicable. Nobody from North Star has ever indicated to Sally or me that they are sorry for what they did to Aaron. Even now they seem convinced that they were performing a benefit to society."

To be sure, not all wilderness-therapy programs are run like boot camps, but wilderness therapy remains an industry in which regulations are lax and profit margins are extremely tantalizing. So long as a demand exists, wilderness therapy is likely to attract more than its share of shady operators and sociopaths. Thus far, there's no evidence that society's chief means of protecting children from abusive programs--oversight, law enforcement, and the courts--have had much effect.

A few months from now, Lance Jaggar, Bill Henry, Eric Henry, Sonny Duncan, Jeff Hohenstein, Craig Fisher, Brent Brewer, and Georgette Costigan will stand trial in Panguitch. If convicted, each could go to prison for up to five years and face a $10,000 fine. If found innocent, they will be free to return to the field of youth treatment.

Gayle Palmer, the founder of Summit Quest, was not charged with any crime after the death of Michelle Sutton. Although she was subsequently denied a license by the Utah Department of Human Services, Palmer brazenly resumed operations. Last year, near Zion National Park, a scruffy, frightened, 14-year-old girl wandered into a remote archaeology camp begging for help. It turned out that she was fleeing from a course Palmer had been running illegally out of St. George, Utah, the same town where she had based Summit Quest.

In the years since Steve Cartisano was acquitted of criminal charges stemming from the death of Kristin Chase, he has directed wilderness programs in a succession of Caribbean locales, sometimes under the alias Scott Richards, generating allegations of abuse and fraud wherever he has landed. In 1993, police in San Juan, Puerto Rico, discovered five boys hog-tied in a car with nooses around their necks. Their keeper explained that the kids were enrolled in one of Cartisano's courses and had been bound to keep them from escaping.

Because Cartisano is being investigated for insurance fraud and other swindles, his precise whereabouts are a sensitive matter that he prefers not to divulge. In a recent phone interview, however, he couldn't resist boasting that he's "running pretty much the same kind of program I've always run." At last report, he had raised tuition to $20,000 and didn't lack customers.

Unrepentant, Cartisano says plenty of parents still applaud his style of treatment. "Our clients come from all over the United States," he says of his current program, based in Costa Rica. "I take kids sailing. We don't have to put up with any ridiculous regulations or inspections down there. Things are going really well."

Jon Krakauer is a contributing editor of Outside. His book about the wilderness death of the vagabond backpacker Chris McCandless, Into the Wild, will be published in January by Villard.

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