

Safety record in question at Mount Carmel Youth Ranch

RUFFIN PREVOSTGazette Wyoming Bureau

Sep 29, 2007



Gerald Schneider, founder and director of Mount Carmel Youth Ranch, formally incorporated the facility in 1997.
RUFFIN PREVOST/Gazette Wyoming Bureau

RUFFIN PREVOSTGazette Wyoming Bureau

CLARK, Wyo. - Along the well-traveled highway between Cody and Billings, a wooden sign at a gravel turnoff pointing east into starkly beautiful high desert says "Mount Carmel Youth Ranch 3 miles."

Few take the turnoff, and indeed few people know much about the youth ranch and what it does.

What most people may know about Mount Carmel Youth Ranch comes from news stories about an assault in September 2005 in which three boys used shovels to brutally beat a sleeping counselor.

That incident - in which John O'Brien, just nine days on the job, suffered severe, permanent head injuries - was neither the first nor the last serious occurrence at the ranch.

A review of dozens of public documents shows a history of problems over the past several years, including multiple failures to report some incidents to the state Department of Family Services, as required by agency rules.

People are also reading...

- 1 Billings man killed in wreck outside of Red Lodge identified**
- 2 Sheridan Police Officer killed in Tuesday morning incident**
- 3 'Torture center': Community condemns Fort Peck jail after in-custody death**
- 4 Suspect in death of Sheridan police officer killed after long standoff**

And an examination of tax documents filed for Mount Carmel raises questions about its interlocked profit-making and nonprofit operations.

O'Brien's mother, Christina Wendlandt, said the ranch should be comprehensively reviewed by the DFS or be shut down.

Still, many parents praise ranch founder and director Gerald Schneider and his staff, saying the program has made positive changes in the lives of many boys.

The DFS reports that the ranch has had "no substantial issues of noncompliance" with agency rules through October 2006, the latest date for which inspection reports were available.

And nearly all those who question how the ranch is operated say Schneider and his staff mean well.

"But in a business like they're running, with the types of boys they have, good intentions aren't enough," O'Brien said. "What is required is the highest quality of care and training and professional ability that combines safe reason and the best mental and emotional therapy possible."

Troubled boys

Mount Carmel Youth Ranch is a group home where troubled boys ages 12 to 17 from around the country spend from three weeks to 18 months living and working on a 40,000-acre cattle ranch.

Some boys come because they are falling behind in school or having behavioral problems, while others have serious juvenile criminal records.

Boys must first enroll in the ranch's wilderness program, where they live in a rustic cabin with few amenities and no running water.

For three months, they earn credit for good behavior toward greater privileges before moving to the long-term bunkhouse, a more traditional group setting.

The wilderness program, which costs \$325 a day for the first 90 days, and the long-term program, which costs \$175 a day, each can hold up to 10 boys.

An independent-living cabin can house two boys, for a potential total of 22 boys on the property.

The boys are enrolled in a home school program and travel off site, usually to Cody or Powell, for counseling. At times, the ranch also has had a licensed therapist and certified teacher on staff.

Activities, which also earn school credit, include such ranch chores as mending fences and delivering calves.

Schneider said the youth ranch started informally after a horseback accident left him with limited mobility and he relied on help from local boys to assist with work around the family cattle ranch.

The venture grew and was formally incorporated in May 1997. Schneider now operates Mount Carmel with his wife, two of his sons and about 20 other staff members who rotate duty shifts.

The Schneiders also operate a separate family cattle business, raising about 250 calves each year.

Over the past decade, the associated operations have grown into a complex network of related corporations, including a nonprofit, tax-exempt public charity that saw total combined revenues of more than \$2.9 million from 2002-05, the most recent years for which figures are available.

Defending safety record

Schneider said he has a good relationship with the state Department of Family Services. That agency's continued certification of the ranch should put to rest any concerns about safety or other issues, he said.

Schneider defended the ranch's safety record, saying he runs a safe operation and buys quality tractors and other equipment, which some boys use.

"You can buy equipment that's less money, but look out. You start losing safety factor on it," Schneider said.

He said there had been only one serious incident involving ranch equipment, which he said was the fault of the boy involved.

"It was an unfortunate accident," Schneider said when asked for details. "He did not follow the safety rules and the accident happened. There were hospital bills, so we went through a settlement with him."

He said the terms of the settlement were confidential.

Bryan Ulmer, an attorney with the Spence Law Firm who represented plaintiff Angus Woodbury IV, said the settlement was not confidential.

Ulmer said Woodbury, who was 15 at the time of the April 2001 accident, was left unsupervised while operating an auger and got his jacket sleeve caught in the fast-spinning machine after replacing a broken bolt with a pin that was too long.

Woodbury suffered multiple fractures, torn muscles and tendons and permanent nerve damage to his right arm, leaving him permanently disabled after multiple surgeries, according to an affidavit filed in the case.

Woodbury filed suit in 2005, alleging that the ranch was negligent in operating poorly maintained and unshielded equipment and in leaving Woodbury and another boy unsupervised for two hours while operating the auger.

As part of a settlement in that case, Woodbury was paid more than \$1.2 million, and the ranch agreed to policy changes that included written notification to parents that boys would be using ranch equipment, Ulmer said.

The settlement also stipulates that machinery be inspected annually and that no boy be allowed to use the auger or any equipment with an unshielded power take-off or driveline, he said.

"His parents weren't aware he'd be using this type of equipment or that it would be in such a condition," Ulmer said. "Hopefully, the settlement will improve conditions."

Other injuries

"Troubled youth enrolled at the Mt. Carmel Wilderness Program have experienced no injuries," says the ranch's Web site, a claim that draws an apparent distinction from the separate long-term program in which Woodbury was enrolled.

Records from the DFS and Park County Sheriff's Office show that a boy was prescribed medication dispensed through the wilderness program for an injury suffered while chopping wood.

A police report on a March 8 incident details how a boy broke into the wilderness camp's medicine storage area, stole several oxycodone tablets and ran away.

The report states that the boy was prescribed the painkillers "due to his having cut the end of his little finger off," but it doesn't say how he was hurt.

Matt Schneider, Gerry's son and assistant director of the ranch, said that in stealing the oxycodone, the boy used a hammer to shatter windows, open three locked doors and pry open a steel box that was bolted to a wall.

Matt Schneider declined to discuss how the boy cut off his fingertip, saying he could not provide "degrading information about a boy."

"It's sad to say he had a lot of problems," Matt Schneider said.

An incident report provided later by the DFS details a Feb. 23 incident in which the boy was chopping kindling with a hatchet and accidentally cut off the tip of his left little finger. It could not be surgically reattached.

Under the "follow-up" section of that incident report, ranch managers list no corrective measures to guard against similar incidents.

A separate report states that 16 days later, a boy was using a sledgehammer and a wedge to split firewood when he accidentally hit his ankle, fracturing it. No staff member was present at the time, the report states.

The follow-up section of that report notes that the ranch is considering buying pre-cut firewood or requiring boys to "go through specific training before they can cut firewood unsupervised."

Honor system

Juliette Rule, a spokeswoman for the DFS, said regulations require facilities like Mount Carmel to report certain incidents to the agency, including runaways, suicide attempts, drug involvement and law enforcement intervention.

John Kiedrowski, a DFS worker in Sheridan who helps oversee Mount Carmel, said all facilities are on the "honor system" to report incidents.

"Otherwise, the only way we find out about things is through complaints or when we go out and talk to people," Kiedrowski said. "We like to get incident reports, but some facilities do better than others."

Rule said the agency last year stepped up efforts to "hold facilities accountable."

"Mount Carmel wasn't in compliance with that rule on reporting incidents. They were reminded of the rule, and we have seen more incident reports since," she wrote.

A September 2006 report on a DFS review of Mount Carmel operations states that "the director reported that no incidents had taken place over the last year."

Police reports indicate otherwise.

An October 2005 police report notes that officers were called when a 16-year-old boy was "being belligerent and uncontrollable."

A November 2005 police report details a runaway attempt.

A May 2006 police report also details a runaway attempt.

While it happened after the September 2006 report, another report details a November 2006 runaway attempt in which a boy jumped out of the emergency exit of a Mount Carmel bus in downtown Cody.

The boy was missing for six hours before police found him.

Rule said the DFS had no record of the four incidents, although each would appear to meet the criteria for reporting.

"I'd like to think they are in compliance now and will say that it doesn't go unnoticed Mount Carmel did call law enforcement when clearly the situation called for it, even though they didn't report to DFS," Rule wrote.

"I'm fairly confident we're getting, I think, the major things that happen," Kiedrowski said.

Kiedrowski, however, said he was unaware of an early 2005 solo hunting trip when a teen at the ranch was given a rifle and allowed to go off on his own to hunt coyotes.

That youth, Bob Hummel, said he entered the Mount Carmel program while suffering from depression. He had high praise for Schneider, the staff and the facility.

Hummel said Schneider took him hunting, and later, after a Christmas break during which he turned 18, Hummel returned to the ranch to complete his high school education.

"Gerry handed me a rifle and said, 'If you want to go shoot a coyote, be my guest.' So I got to go out with a .308 rifle without supervision by myself," Hummel said.












Kiedrowski later spoke with Schneider about the matter, and said Schneider recalled that Hummel was living in Powell at the time, was not in the program, and that he had received hunter safety training, Schneider said.

Hummel said he had a brief course in hunter safety but was enrolled in the program at the time.

"Any kid in the program who is wandering around with a weapon, whether he's trustworthy or not - that's why our rules say those weapons have to be locked up in a way kids don't have access to them," Kiedrowski said.

Contact Ruffin Prevost at rprevost@billingsgazette.com or 307-527-7250.

Popular in the Community

<p>Hours after Rosendale jumps into Senate race, Trump...</p> <p> Erik Neva 9 Feb</p> <p>Matt Rosendale is an election denier, Sheehy has his Chines...</p> <p> Top Comment  17</p>	<p>It's time for Northeast to prep for floods like those th...</p> <p> DOGDANE 59m</p> <p>The claims by the author are not supported by climate...</p> <p> Top Comment </p>	<p>Billings Public Schools prepares to educate refuge...</p> <p> gary Warren 8h</p> <p>Always encouraging to wake up on Sunday and see what my...</p> <p> Top Comment  1</p>	<p>Letter to the edit Montana leaders</p> <p> Basil Fawly</p> <p>Thank you for you letter to the editor</p> <p> Top Comment</p>
--	--	---	---