

## 2 views of school under fire

### **Parents and former students react: Some see hope now because of academy's therapy methods, while others see an opportunity — at least — for abuse**

By [Keith Chu](#) / *The Bulletin*

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Jana Adkins is convinced her daughter would have ended up dead, if not for Mount Bachelor Academy.

At 14, Meghan was drinking, failing school and being abused by her boyfriend.

Adkins and her husband had looked into therapeutic schools but couldn't bear sending Meghan away. Not until she ran away from home for two days, came home and ran away again. "We decided we could not afford to wait any longer," Adkins said. "It's sheer gut-wrenching desperation parents feel to save their kids."

That desperation drove Adkins to send Meghan hundreds of miles away from their Southern California home to Mount Bachelor Academy, located about 25 miles east of Prineville, and to leave the girl there, despite initial reservations about the school's methods. Now, she feels only relief and gratitude that Meghan graduated from the school, free of the demons that had plagued her.

On April 4, the Oregon Department of Human Services confirmed it was investigating a report of abuse and a licensing issue at the academy. That investigation ignited a long-simmering dispute about the effectiveness of schools like Mount Bachelor that use unconventional methods to treat troubled teens.

Parents of current and former students, and at least one school employee, urged supporters to write newspapers and investigators with testimonials of the school's success. Meanwhile, mental health professionals and former students who have been critical of the academy seized on the incident as validation of their own objections to those methods.

Mount Bachelor Academy is owned by the Aspen Education Group, which also owns Sagewalk Wilderness School in Deschutes County along with more than a dozen other residential and wilderness schools across the country.

Adkins' story, of a parent desperate to try nearly anything to help her child, was similar to that of many parents who sent kids to the private school for troubled teens. But several former students, some whose attendance dated back 15 years, confirmed initial reports that youths there have been punished with long stretches of manual labor and that girls

were sometimes made to wear revealing outfits as part of therapeutic workshops, called Lifesteps.

Maisa Maisa is now 33 and a mother of two young children in San Diego. She sells motorcycle parts, and her husband is a cook, she said. She remembers her time at the school clearly.

Maisa was sent there in 1992 in part because she was a promiscuous teen, which she traces back to being abused as a child. Her parents told her she was going to a summer camp. She ended up staying until December 1994.

Maisa said she followed the school rules, even winning a humanitarian award for starting a program pairing veteran students with newcomers.

Mount Bachelor Academy Executive Director Sharon Bitz said students are given roles, but they choose their own costumes. School officials have never told students to act in a way that would “sexualize them,” Bitz said.

“A lot of (costumes) are gathered from their own things in their dorm,” Bitz said. “They’re given time to gather their costume. We would never ask a student to give a lap dance.”

Maisa said one of her therapeutic workshops was similar to that described by former student Fembe Adamou, including a revealing costume and acting out undesirable behavior.

“In those workshops, each person is given a role to play that they feel like exaggerates what is your biggest behavioral problem,” Maisa said. “For girls, they’ll make us do things that exaggerate our sluttiness, such as dressing up in outfits and doing sexual things.”

A contemporary of Maisa’s, Jason “Ocean” Mottley, had a better experience at Mount Bachelor Academy while there from late 1991 until December 1993, he said. But he confirmed that students were often asked to act out provocative behavior.

“Women were often asked to dress provocatively, like fishnets, short skirts, makeup. I know at times they were asked to act provocatively,” Mottley said. “At least one person in each workshop had to do that exercise the entire time I was there.”

Jennifer Britton, now 22, has only positive memories of Mount Bachelor Academy. She declined to describe one phase of the Lifesteps curriculum, called “venture,” in detail. Britton said she was told to dress up, in a similar way to other girls there, to cope with past promiscuous behavior.

“When I did venture, they showed me similar things, and it’s more of an eye-opener, and it’s definitely not made to embarrass you or anything,” Britton said.

Blake Segal, 19, said he had a similar experience at the academy when he was there from February 2007 to June 2008. Segal, who now attends Montana State University in Bozeman, said his parents sent him to the school because he was caught smoking marijuana.

Segal said he was present in one session where a girl was told to “wear, like, stripper outfits” and “give every guy in there lap dances.” In another session, a girl was given the role of a homeless person, complete with ripped clothes.

Leif Kelly-Weaver, 17, left the program with his parents’ permission last fall.

Kelly-Weaver said he felt like the program was designed to change his personality, which he didn’t like. He said he was disturbed by his part in another student’s venture workshop.

“I had to take the role of one of the people who had repeatedly molested her throughout her whole childhood up until several years ago,” Kelly-Weaver said. “They’d push me to keep on going and hold her down.”

The idea, Kelly-Weaver said, was to let the girl re-enact childhood trauma, but this time it was to defeat her attacker.

“It felt like my will was being taken advantage of,” Kelly-Weaver said. “I was being pushed to do things I wasn’t comfortable with.”

Former student Brady Miller, now an English major at the University of Kansas, also now credits Mount Bachelor Academy with helping him find his way.

Miller also said students would “sleep a couple of hours” during the Lifesteps workshops. He said one girl “who had been kind of a slut, I guess you would say, she had to go around flirting with the guys or whatever. She had to act like she was trying to get with me.”

But Miller said the girl wore her regular clothes with “like a boa around her neck,” not a revealing costume.

Executive Director Bitz said the school ensures that students sleep a minimum of 5.5 hours each night while participating in the Lifesteps workshops and that Mount Bachelor Academy “has no interest in depriving students of sleep.” Students who believe they slept less than that are wrong, she said.

“I don’t think they would be real aware of it because there’s not a clock in the workshop room,” Bitz said. “I think it’s interesting that they’re so concerned about sleep because most of these kids were used to being out all night.”

Segal said sleep was limited to “only two or three hours” during his Lifesteps. Segal said clocks and watches weren’t allowed in the room where his workshop took place, but he was “tired and groggy” throughout the workshop.

Mottley, now 33 and a third-year law student at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, said most staffers were “very well-intentioned and very loving people” and that he thinks of Bitz as “an amazing woman.”

But he and Maisa each said sleep was scarce during the workshops.

“It’s true there was no clock on the wall,” Mottley said. “But I know there were Lifesteps where I didn’t sleep at all.”

When he broke a school rule, Mottley said, he was assigned a “work project” of breaking rocks for three weeks as punishment. Several other students described similar disciplinary work projects.

Mottley said the academy has helped many children, especially with “how to talk about their feelings in a healthy way.”

But he said parents are often “clueless” about some aspects of the school.

“I think it’s important there’s an investigation of the school,” Mottley said. “I think the program itself theoretically is meant to help people, but it can also be abused.”

In the late 1990s, Sharon Ferguson was one of the parents of academy students who objected to methods there. Her complaint, along with concerns by four former staff members, led to a state investigation in 1998. That investigation ultimately found that Mount Bachelor Academy was a safe place for students.

Ferguson said her son, who is now 27, complained of being ridiculed and yelled at by staff. At first she did not believe him, because she was warned by school officials that troubled teens often lie to their parents.

“(School officials said) ‘Don’t believe anything your son or daughter tells you. ... They are all lying. They are going to make up stories about us,’” Ferguson said.

It’s true that students can leave the Lifesteps if they feel uncomfortable, said former student Segal. But that will extend their stay at the school by a month or more.

“If we don’t do what they tell us, we get kicked out (of the Lifesteps), and we have to wait a month later to do it (again),” Segal said.

Supporters of the school often said it’s hard to understand the methods from the outside without going through the entire experience.

Britton said she found the school strange at first.

“I was like, ‘I’m in a nuthouse. This place is crazy. These people are going to brainwash me,’” Britton said.

She grew to appreciate the academy, however. It helped her learn self-confidence. There was physical labor, like digging up a tree stump, but “a little back-breaking labor never hurt anybody,” Britton said. And although she relapsed into drugs and other bad behavior after she left Mount Bachelor Academy, she credits the school with helping her get back on track.

“After I did all my drugs and got some stuff out of my system, I was like, ‘Wow, I couldn’t have come out of this funk if I didn’t have the tools MBA gave me,’” Britton said.

Adkins said she also found some of the therapeutic methods strange, but she saw her daughter continue to improve.

“If I had not had that experience, to have someone describe the Lifesteps to me, I would just think they were nuts,” Adkins said. “As long as I continued to see positive growth in her, I maintained trust in the process.”

Miller said he was a troublemaker while attending Mount Bachelor Academy in 2004, before he realized the school helped him.

“I did everything within my power to get out of that place, from the day I got there to the day I left,” he said.

Miller said he dealt drugs in the suburbs of Wichita, Kan., before being sent to the school.

In one workshop, Miller, formerly a star soccer player, was told to do tricks with a soccer ball and then explain how he had hurt his friends and family. In another, he “rolled a 60-pound stump end over end up the side of a f----- mountain,” Miller said.

“Once I got there, I had to stand on top of a stump and yell out to a whole valley, ‘I’m better than a drug dealer. People do like me.’ ... I just broke down and started crying.”

Still, it wasn’t until he had been away from Mount Bachelor Academy for two years that he began to view his time there positively.

“I seriously had nightmares for two years after leaving, that I would be stuck back there and I couldn’t leave, and my dad would be there and be like, ‘You’re staying here,’” Miller said. “I’d wake up and be like, ‘Thank God I’m not there.’”

Sometime after that, though, “I started wanting to go back there,” Miller said.

“I just started to think, ‘Wow, that place wanted to do nothing but to help me.’”

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