These kids face harsh reality

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By Joanna Weiss, Globe Staff | August 10, 2005

When Jada Chabot slammed her speedboat into a family's inflatable raft on Wrentham Pond last week, the local media pounced with more vigor than they might on the average reckless 16-year-old.

But then, Chabot is a TV personality, labeled a "brat" and a "liar" on ABC's reality series "Brat Camp." She's famous precisely because she's troubled and underage.

And for ABC, she represents a ratings gold mine and an ethical dilemma.

"Brat Camp" which consistently garners high ratings on Wednesday nights, marries two burgeoning reality TV trends: a focus on personal crises (as in A&E's "Intervention") and the increased use of minors as "characters." Most reality-show kids seem vaguely well adjusted in front of the cameras, as they take part in mother-swapping social experiments and domestic games.

But for "Brat Camp," ABC went looking for teens who were decidedly unstable. Network officials declined to comment for this story, but Marilyn Engelman, a Westborough psychologist and educational consultant, said ABC contacted her and other professionals with the promise of something valuable: tuition at SageWalk, an Oregon wilderness program for troubled youth, which can cost about $425 per day.

Engelman said her initial thought was, "Why would a family want to expose themselves?" But when Chabot's parents walked into her office, they were desperate, Engelman said; Jada had failed at nine schools and needed something different. Residential programs were expensive.

And Jada, Engelman said, seemed to love the idea of being on TV.

Engelman said she warned Jada that the experience wouldn't be glamorous. What she didn't realize, she said, was that the edited-for-TV version of the camp would look so unrealistic, presenting outdoor therapy as a miracle cure.

"I think the idea of a therapeutic outward bound type of program is excellent," Engelman said. "I have seen it do wonders for kids, but they usually need a next step."

Larry Solie, executive director of SageWalk, said he agreed to take part in the TV show -- described to him as a documentary -- because he wanted to "show the public what wilderness therapy was all about." He said he's received only positive letters about the show, despite the outcry in some circles.

"These programs are meant for intervention and at no time do we ever say, they're long-term cures," he said.

But the TV version hinges on the notion that wilderness therapy yields instant results; in recent episodes, we've seen drug-addled Lauren talk frankly about her father's death; sexual assault victim Lexie face her fears by rappelling down a cliff; dyslexic Nick learn self-discipline through a primitive process of starting a fire. In a voice-over narration, with a knowing tone, program leader Tony Randazzo described each scene as a breakthrough.

In real life, the work wasn't finished. There was Chabot's recent boating mishap, for which she faces charges from the Massachusetts Environmental Police.

When the media hurricane struck last week, Chabot's mother, Karyn, dealt with her share of regret, and said the "free" therapy ABC had promised wasn't worth the cost.

"If she's going to do a personal tranformation," Karyn Chabot said, "it's got to be in private."

Earlier this month, Isaiah Alarcon, 17, described on the show as "an angry punk," was picked up by California police for spray-painting racist graffiti in front of a black woman's house.

In both cases, the local-media storyline was the same: Oops, the kid's still a brat.

It was exactly what Andrea Watson had feared. Since the show launched, the founder of the local advocacy group Parents for Residential Reform has been railing at ABC for returning kids to their communities with continued troubles and newfound public profiles. She has helped to circulate a letter calling for a boycott of the show's sponsors, and asked local ABC affiliate WCVB (Channel 5) to pull the show. And in part, she blamed SageWalk -- whose officials did not return calls seeking comment -- for agreeing to take part.

"The more I look, the sicker I am," Watson said. "Any responsible provider would never allow this to be."

Shay Bilchik, president and CEO of the Child Welfare League of America, said he fears the show sends desperate parents a dangerous message: that all outdoor programs are effective and safe. Bilchik said he is penning a letter to Congress asking for a General Accounting Office inquiry into residential treatment programs.

"I'm not condeming them as much as saying, 'Let's shed a light on it,' " Bilchik said.

Still, he questions whether ABC should have aired the show, and whether the producers should have pitched the idea. "I think the people who put these programs on have a social responsibility," he said, "to make sure they put on things that serve society well."

TV networks, in fact, do their share of second-guessing. In July, ABC pulled the slated reality show "Welcome to the Neighborhood" -- which plunked a variety of ethnically diverse families onto a white Texas block -- after antidiscrimination and fair housing groups complained. (The Fox Reality Channel has reportedly offered to buy the series from ABC.)

But if networks are sensitive to bad publicity, they're also acutely aware of the bottom line. And for that reason, the viewers who made "Brat Camp" a ratings success are complicit, too, said Clay Calvert, a Pennyslvania State University professor and author of "Voyeur Nation."

"It's easy to point blame at the parents and the television production companies and ABC in this case, but we have to look at ourselves," Calvert said. "If we didn't watch it, it wouldn't be on."

Still, networks should use different standards when minors are involved, said Mark Andrejevic, a University of Iowa professor and the author of "Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched."

"If adults want to go on reality shows and make fools of themselves, or worse, that's their prerogative," Andrejevic said in an e-mail from Australia. "But we ought to do our best to protect kids -- especially troubled teens -- from being used by TV producers as cheap labor to sell advertising."

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