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[Back to previous page](#)



Former student alleges abuse in teen boot camps run by Utah-based alternative school program

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SALT LAKE CITY — A man from Washington state has become the latest to sue a Utah-based organization for troubled children, claiming he was physically and emotionally tormented during its teen boot camp programs in Mexico.

Attorneys for Carl Brown Austin, 24, of Spokane, filed the lawsuit Tuesday in U.S. District Court in Salt Lake City against World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools.

Austin spent nearly two years, starting at age 13, at the organization's Casa by the Sea and High Impact programs. He alleged he was a "virtual prisoner" in programs that meted out primitive punishment for hours on end.

The lawsuit said Casa by the Sea in Ensenada, Mexico, was never licensed by any state regulatory authority as a "treatment center" and that High Impact in Baja, Mexico, was shut down by government edict in 2002 after complaints from parents.

Austin claimed he was hogtied, given limited access to bathrooms and food and endured "The Big Green" — which meant having his head rubbed into an artificial turf until his face and mouth were bloody. It also claimed the organization and its officials conspired to conceal the abuse at its boarding schools.

"I'm just now trying to change my life around," Austin said. "I've been through so much. It's a traumatic thing to have to go through when I was just 13."

An attorney for the organization, which was based in St. George, Utah, did not immediately return a call seeking comment Thursday.

Austin said he wanted his own lawsuit filed rather than join a lawsuit pending in federal court after five years because "I would like to have my story heard."

The other lawsuit, brought in 2006 initially on behalf of a Texas man, now has 350-plus plaintiffs — mostly victims claiming abuse and parents who sent their children to various alternative programs run by the organization.

Also named as defendants are organization principals Robert B. Litchfield, of Toquerville, Utah, and Brent M. Facer.

Facer, reached in California on Thursday, said he was a board member of World Wide for four or five years but indicated it exists now on paper only. He said World Wide shut down because there wasn't a need for its programs any more.

He maintained that Casa by the Sea was "a well-run program" and that "safety and security were paramount." He said he had no knowledge of Austin or abuse allegations and knew only of "a few isolated incidents that got some attention." Asked why former students might bring such accusations, Facer said children brought to such schools have a history of misrepresenting the truth.

"That's why these kids need help," Facer said. "They lie to their parents, lie to their superiors, teachers, people who maybe they would consider an authoritative type of figure. That's not uncommon."

Austin's mother, Glenna Pierson, and her husband also are plaintiffs in his lawsuit. The lawsuit seeks to recover more than \$50,000 Pierson spent for her son to be in the Casa by the Sea program, as well as actual and punitive damages for the abuse he suffered.

Austin said his relationship with his mother is still "on the fence" as he struggles with trust issues after being sent from home for being a troublemaker.

"It's hard for me to forgive but I'm trying," he said of his mother.

The 36-page lawsuit said Pierson pulled him from the program in 2002 but claimed he could not adjust to normal life after the abuse. It said he had trouble with the law and drugs.

The programs "wrecked the life of a very young adolescent that needed nurturing, patience, and love, not the foolish 'behavior modification' at which defendants excel," the lawsuit said.

Austin, who along with his girlfriend runs a babysitting service from his home in Spokane, said even smells can trigger flashbacks.

"They made this juice with syrup and water and I'd be out driving and have the window down and ... it'd take me right back again to where I was when I was 13," Austin said. He said he had been having recurring nightmares but that prescription medicine has helped him sleep better.

“Coming back from that environment, I was so angry,” he said. “My head had been messed with. There was lots of brainwashing.”

He insisted he no longer is in trouble with the law, and is trying to be a role model for the children he babysits. “But part of the reason I got this job is because I don’t like to leave the house. I have this wall built around myself. I don’t trust anyone,” he said.

“I don’t think these kids frankly ever get over it,” said Salt Lake City attorney Thomas Burton, who filed the suit on behalf of Austin. “It’s that bad, when they’re adolescents and their psyche is just developing.”

He pointed to other cases where children in wilderness or residential programs committed suicide or serious crimes against others “because they can’t take it anymore.”

“I know people who say the Army saved my life. But the Army has good food, recourse, oversight. It’s rough, but it’s fair,” Burton said. “In these (programs), who knows? They’re off in the wilderness and nobody’s checking on them.”

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