

A Reading on Teen Challenge of North Carolina in NC (Published November 3rd, 2021)
Sermon Delivered by Proxy (Rev. Angela Smith)/Written by Jill Vanderwater (1977-2014:In Loving Memory)

[The following is in Jill Vanderwater's own words from e-mails she sent to HEAL Mission.]

When I was 14 years old my Grandmother convinced my Mother to send me to Teen Challenge in North Carolina. I don't know if it exists anymore. I hope not. But I feel parents, and the nation, should be warned before throwing your children away. These people are a cult! They are no different than David Coresh, or Charles Manson.

First of all, I'm sure that you'll want to know why I was sent there. It stems way back into my family from a time when my Mom was a little girl. My Grandmother threw my Mom away as a child. She wanted to live the high life with her new rich husband, who hated my Mother. So one day, while visiting my Great-Grandmother, my Mother was in the bath tub and my Grandmother just took off, never to return. She kept all the child support money that my Grandfather was sending (even though she didn't need it), and was just living it up in San Francisco, New York, and world cruises.

Fast forward many years until I was about the same age my Mother had been back then, and I ran away from home. It was a mistake. I'm still dearly sorry almost 20 years later for it. I wasn't in an abusive situation. I wasn't drinking or on drugs. I wasn't in any gangs. I was never in any trouble. My friend at the time however, decided to run away from home and I was scared for her. I didn't feel it was safe for her to run away all by herself. So she convinced me to go with her.

About 8 hours later, we were picked up by the police, who called our parents. My Grandmother in her subconscious guilt convinced my Mother to send me away, so she could point her finger at my Mom and say, "See, you did it too."

Now that being said, let me tell you about Teen Challenge there in Harmony, NC. Upon arriving they went through my suit case and took what they wanted. Cloths, toiletries, all my money. They told me I had to wear nothing but dresses or skirts (which they provided) and they had to be ankle length. Ok, except this was the middle of December and very cold. They told me that if I should run away, since we were out in the middle of no-where, I'd likely never be found again. That other girls have tried running away, and sometimes their bodies were found. And sometimes they were never heard from again. Sound familiar? This is a passive-aggressive tactic commonly used by cult leaders to keep their flock from fleeing. It's psychological terrorism.

I was not allowed for the first two weeks to send or receive letters or phone calls. But after the two weeks I could make or accept one 15 min. phone call per month -which were monitored. In retrospect, my Mother told me that she called numerous times and they told her I was either busy or was at church etc. My Mother, and many other people in my family sent letters, cards, money, gifts, much needed clothing and none of it ever

got to me. Except one Bible my Grandmother sent me. We were not allowed to have contact with the outside world, other than that. No T.V. Radio was forbidden. No news papers. No secular music. If you brought your own tapes, they were destroyed in a fire pit, along with whatever else they didn't approve of. These are all common tactics used by cult leaders to isolate the victim from everything but the cult.

Our daily schedule was as follows: 5:30 - 6:00am, wake up -private prayer time. 6:00-6:15am quick breakfast which we had to prepare ourselves and eat in that 15 minute time. From 6:15 to 7:30-Chapel, in which one would praise the Lord whether you were Christian or not. Then from 7:30-noon we would have Bible school. After Bible school, on Mondays and Tuesdays we would have to go to one of the two nursing homes around the Harmony area and sing Gospel Hymns for the residence there. After we got back it was chore time.

Chores were assigned and rotated. Some of the chores included cleaning the Wheeler's (Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler were the elderly couple that ran Teen Challenge) private apartments everyday, which included their private sauna, hot tub, a bathroom that can only be compared to something you'd see in Better Homes and Gardens millionaire edition. As well as the rest of the spacious house/ property. WE were forbidden to use the Wheelers bathroom facilities. There was a pool on the property, we were never allowed to use it. But we still had to get in that green, slimy, freezing cold water, with all the frogs, snakes and bacteria, and clean it out by hand. We did our own laundry. And even though there was a working dryer on the property, only the Wheelers were allowed to use it. We had to hang our clothes on an outdoor clothesline, even if it was raining or freezing cold. And because of where we were, our clothes always came off the line smelling like cow dung.

Those assigned to kitchen duty had to cook, serve and clean up after dinner. There would be two of them for all the residence and staff. We're talking two people for about twenty. Also, do you notice a few missing things here? I hope you do. Sometimes we didn't have breakfast at all, because all our food (when it was edible and not moldy) was obtained via donation. We never had lunch. The Wheelers and staff, never did anything -ever. When I mention school, it is only Bible school. Those underage didn't have any academic schooling whatsoever while living there. When cleaning, we didn't really have supplies. Often we had to share two raggedy sponges to clean the entire place. But I digress. Let's get back to schedule.

After chores was chapel again, followed by dinner, then private prayer again and bed. Something missing here too? Yeah. Showers. Even though there were bath tubs, we were not permitted to use them. We were allowed two five minute showers per week each. I'm not kidding. A total of ten minutes to shower per week. All toiletries were given to us, and like food, was obtained via donation. Some of us would even have to share deodorant (gross) or go without. Wednesday nights we would have church. And Sunday mornings and nights we would have church. We only ever left the place for church tree times per week and nursing homes twice per week.

Now, let me tell you about church. We traveled to various churches all over North Carolina. I swear I've probably attended every church in that state, no matter how remote it was. At these churches we were made to give "testimony" about how Jesus and Teen Challenge changed our lives. Mrs. Wheeler forced me to get on stage before anywhere between 30 people to 2000 people and she told me to say I was a Satanist, an alcoholic a drug addict having promiscuous sex and making sacrifices to Satan, but Jesus and Teen challenge saved my life. Often times I would cry on stage. Not because I was moved by the holy spirit, but because I knew this was wrong. And I was secretly praying for God, or someone, to save me from this place. But, we were not permitted to speak directly to anyone from the churches. If anyone from 'the outside' were to spark a conversation with us we had to pretend or even lie and say something like, "Oh, my ride is leaving, I have to go."

Rules and punishment: Well, I already stated most of the rules here. Punishment included, but was not limited to phone privileges taken away, mail suspended, isolation, shunning and starvation. There was even an underage, pregnant teenage girl there that they starved for two days! But if you did something bad enough that you weren't allowed to eat, you still had to cook for everybody and sit at the dining room table and watch everyone else eat.

All of this they get away with in the name of religion! If everyone in the country really knew what went on at these places, they would be shut down in a heart beat. Well, any other place would anyway. Remember Waco, TX?

Finally, after phase 1 was soon to be over for me, they told my Mother that they were going to send me to phase 2, in the middle of a no-where desert in New Mexico. My Mother, knowing that people really do disappear in the desert, said No, and to send me back home. They didn't want to. So my Mother had to drive all the way to North Carolina to physically take me away. Come to find out, she was the only one giving them money, because they told her she had to. Everyone else was there not giving them money. And I certainly didn't see any of it, or the benefits.

And don't tell me how these places have helped so many people get off of drugs. Yes, there were adults there that might've had drug problems there. But they should've been in a detox facility under the care of proper Doctors! Not brain-washing cult leaders. People could have died. People probably have died. But the minute someone mentions the name Jesus, it all is supposed to be ok right?

People, I urge you, do not send your family members to Teen Challenge! Even if you get your family member back, the psychological trauma is long lasting. These places need to come under full investigation and shut down permanently!

[If you are a victim of Teen Challenge of NC, please see the reporting guide at <https://www.heal-online.org/tcnc.htm> and file complaints in a timely fashion so this program is fully investigated by the authorities and hopefully finally shut down. You will also find embedded video memorials for Jill Vanderwater at that link.]

COPE accepts Feedback, critical and complimentary. Learn more at <https://www.cope.church/feedback.htm> . For the sake of keeping myself and others humble, a sense of humor is welcome on all sides.

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