

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Sex, Alcohol, Use Of Illicit Drugs And Lap Dancing Reported At A-Z Academy's Big Island Adventure Camp; V.I.P.D., Human Services To Launch Investigations

Exclusive / **Published On July 22, 2017 11:48 AM /**

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ST. CROIX -- Looking at the description of a weekend adventure organized by Big Island Adventure Camp, one of the most popular summer camps on St. Croix and an arm of [private school A-Z Academy](#), the urge to sign your child up would be hard to resist, although the weekend came at a cost of \$85 per child, aside from the \$100 a week for the regular camp.

Part of the description reads: "CITs [Counselor in Training] will experience sustainable living through an authentic Caribbean lifestyle. They will assist in transforming existing garden beds, harvesting produce, making candles from bee hives and more. We will start the trip off by setting into our cottages and the property, go over goals of the trip and dive into activities."

But during the weekend of July 7-9, while at the weekend adventure on the North Side Valley Estate, what was supposed to be an experience with children that would help them grow and learn new skills, turned into a devastating exposure to sex, drugs and alcohol for the teenagers, leaving parents, most of whom learned what took place only on Thursday, in shock, lamenting that their kids' innocence had been violated at a camp that many had come to respect, as the supervision needed to prevent such behavior was not adequate, and even worse, adult employees of A-Z Academy tasked with overseeing the teens, not only condoned the behavior, but participated in the criminal acts as well.

A-Z Academy Teacher and Camp Director Julie Landreneau, during a meeting with parents on Thursday evening at the private school, cried as she apologized for what took place. She admitted that the children had sex with each other and also gave lap dances. She was said to have stated, "We dropped the ball," in the meeting.

"All I could say is I'm sorry. I don't even know what to say to you; all I can say is that I am sorry that your children, on my watch, were not taken care of, and that my staff that I trusted did not handle themselves appropriately. And maybe I expected too much," Ms. Landreneau said at the meeting to stunned parents according to audio of the meeting heard by The Consortium, some hearing of what took place for the first time.

The meeting was called after a female teenager, who was to attend another similar adventure with the Big Island Adventure Camp, told her parents about what took place at North Side Valley.

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Ms. Landreneau, who admitted to leaving every night during the three-day weekend adventure around 9:00 p.m. and leaving the teenagers to be supervised by the 19-year-old and 26-year-old, nonetheless insisted that she was with the teenagers 90 percent of the time.

"I'm going to tell you that there was drugs, there was alcohol, there was sex, there was lap dancing going on, pretending that we're at a sex bar or whatever. I don't know what it was... I think the lap dancing, the truth or dare was going on with my staff. Certainly not the example that I teach," she said.

Yet, after learning of the event, law enforcement was not immediately contacted by the school. At least one parent, whose 14-year-old was exposed to the behavior -- with one of the male teenagers initially bragging about having sex with the child, only to change his version of what happened as the pressure intensified -- reporting the matter in detail to the V.I.P.D. as well as the Dept. of Human Services, Child Care and Regulatory Services division.

D.H.S. Public Relations Officer, Carol Burke, told The Consortium on Friday that a thorough investigation would be conducted and appropriate action taken.

"Know that the department itself [D.H.S.], in conjunction with the V.I.P.D., will conduct a complete investigation into the matter and make a determination as to the licensing of the Academy as a summer camp for children, as well as any other related issues that we have to take up," Ms. Burke said. "We're not going to sit on our hands, look at it and not do anything."

She added, "The department is committed to any investigation that needs to be done in regards to what our children [are] being exposed to at a summer camp, and what happened in terms of their safety." She said once the investigation is completed, "know that the commissioner [of D.H.S.] will be prepared to do what is necessary to deal with the license, or any other related [matter]. The well-being and welfare of our children are equally important issues to deal with the camp moving forward."

Calls placed to V.I.P.D. Commissioner Delroy Richards were not returned at time of writing.

The adult employees, a 19-year-old and 26-year-old, admitted at the meeting to participating in the use of marijuana and alcohol at the weekend adventure getaway. These employees have since been fired by A-Z Academy. The lap dancing among employees was believed to be between CITs, whose ages range from 14 to 16. It is not clear whether the 19-year-old and or the 26-year-old participated in the lap dancing activities. Weapons were also said to be at the weekend adventure, including a gun and a knife.

And whether there were other lewd behavior at the camp remains unknown, as some of those involved admitted to being high on marijuana and alcohol with little recollection of some of the things that took place. Furthermore, not all parents of children involved- - roughly 15 -- were at the meeting, leaving open the question whether all parents knew what took place.

The North Side Valley, located on the north shore of Frederiksted past the V.I. National Guard Facility, is a maze of cabins on a highly secluded, hilly estate. The estate's expansive grounds, dotted with mango trees, palm trees, grass and bushes, appear to be perfect for a getaway that frees its guests from the outside world; there is no cellphone reception in the area.

Why more supervision was not provided to the teenagers sent to a location so disconnected from civilization, is a question Ms. Landreneau and the school's Executive Director Paula Heller, will have to answer.

Correction: July 22, 2017

A-Z Academy Teacher and Camp Director Julie Landreneau was the person who spoke at the meeting, and the individual present at the weekend getaway, who'd leave at nights, and not school director Paula Heller. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.

Correction: July 24, 2017

The correction age of one of the adults supervisors is 26, not 27. We've updated the story.

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