

The Virgin Islands Consortium

AZ Academy, In Statement, Says It's 'Dismayed' By Irresponsible Behavior Of Big Island Adventure Camp Staff Involved In North Side Valley Incident

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ST. CROIX -- AZ Academy Executive Director late Saturday issued a statement in regards to reported lewd behavior at its Big Island Adventure Camp North Side Valley weekend getaway, following [a Consortium report](#) that brought to the fore illicit activity that had taken place during the weekend of July 7-9.

The statement comes as pressure builds on the school, and as the V.I.P.D., Dept. of Human Services as well as the Department of Justice are all looking into the matter. Police Commissioner Delroy Richards told The Consortium this afternoon that once the

force's investigation is completed, the findings will be presented to the Department of Justice. Attorney General Claude Walker told The Consortium today that D.O.J. will be following the matter closely.

In the statement, Ms. Heller says the school has conducted a thorough investigation, although she did not share the findings in her statement. However, at meeting with parents on Thursday evening, AZ Academy Teacher and Camp Director Julie Landreneau, said that the school had "dropped the ball."

"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.

She added, "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."

Ms. Landreneau, who said she left the camp every night at about 9:00 p.m., added that she felt comfortable leaving the teenagers with the 19-year-old and 26-year-old, as well as the counselors in training (CITs), all below 18. "All I could say is when I left every night I felt good," she said.

Ms. Heller revealed in her statement that the school had retained attorney Gordon Rhea, a former federal prosecutor, as counsel, which Ms. Heller said was in an effort "to ensure that AZ's investigation is as thorough and well guided as possible."

"On Wednesday night, July 19, 2017, AZ learned of allegations of irresponsible staff behavior alleged to have occurred at an activity of the Big Island Adventure Camp. Immediately upon learning of allegations of irresponsible staff behavior, AZ urgently began to gather facts and has thoroughly investigated – and continues to thoroughly investigate – to determine what actually happened versus what is alleged to have occurred," reads the statement.

It continues, "The paramount concern of the entire AZ community is the safety and well-being of children in our care. We are dismayed at the irresponsible staff behavior that is alleged to have occurred at the Big Island Adventure Camp. We take these allegations very seriously and will continue to work cooperatively with the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services and other authorities to ensure a complete and accurate factual account of the events in question."

The Thursday 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.

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 — reported 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.”

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 27-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. Landdreneau and the school’s Executive Director Paula Heller, will have to answer.

The school will not be taking any questions, however. Instead, all inquiries for comment have been directed to Mr. Rhea.

Correction: July 24, 2017

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

