

A month after my 13th birthday, I was sent to Mount Bachelor Academy. I was in the midst of depression when I arrived there; several life-altering experiences happened to me in 1989 that would send any pre-pubescent girl into depression. My family moved several times before I was 12. It was very difficult to make friends and keep them, constantly being the "new girl" and I was frequently bullied. In February, 1989, my family moved from Southern California to the Bay Area, forcing me to change schools in the middle of the year, and quit competitive figure skating, which had become very important to me. I am adopted, and had dreams of meeting my birth mother. On my 13th birthday, my parents told me that she died at the age of 24 from cancer. I was having a very hard time going through puberty, including having severe, hemorrhaging menstrual periods. I was depressed and felt completely alone. The day after my 13th birthday, I took a bunch of pills in an attempted suicide.

While I stayed in a youth inpatient hospital, my parents hired an educational consultant, who suggested they send me to MBA, claiming that the school had "stellar academic opportunities" and had "summer camp-like activities, year-round." Nothing could have been further from the truth.

There was not one day that went by at MBA that I wasn't told that I was "worthless". I still have a difficult time feeling worthy of happiness, 30 years later.

Groups were confrontational exchanges of which all students were pushed to "work on our issues" by being confronted by staff and students and encouraged to cry and scream until blood vessels popped (it became a competition between a few of my peers to see who had more blue and red dots in and around our eyes from "group"). A staff member would choose a student to confront, and he/she would get up and walk across the room to directly face said student, with a ritual of changing seats to do so. Routine group was every other day for 3 hours. It was well known that if you did not have any pressing issues at the time, you would need to have 1 or 2 in your head, or create one, because if they confronted you about not "having anything to work on", you would be yelled and screamed at for that, and they would end up creating issues for you that may have not even been real. When an all school group was called it was usually to address someone breaking the rules and to use that student as an example by humiliating them in front of the school and encouraging students to join in, screaming at them for prolonged periods of time, anywhere from 6-36 hours.

Lifesteps. were the pillars of the emotional growth curriculum, 9 "workshops" that lasted anywhere from 24 hours to 7 days. They were torture. Peer groups entered the Great Hall, a small, stand-alone building with one large, multi-purpose room, one bathroom, and a large closet. The windows were covered in heavy cardboard and duct tape to keep us from knowing what time of day it was, once inside. They were shrouded in secrecy, each one themed.

Lifesteps were intense sessions of trauma therapy, bioenergetics, confrontation, humiliation techniques. None of the staff administering these therapies were licensed therapists. The length varied from 24 hours to 2 weeks. The emotional themes varied from friendship, to the child within, to your dark side and more. There were 9 and these were what the school were

centered upon. Usually a peer group of 6-15 students entered each Lifestep at a time. The staff insisted that we could tell no one outside of the peer group what happened in these lifesteps. If the staff found out that someone told another of what happened in their Lifestep, they were made an example of by either calling an "all school group", self study, or work project.

In the Lifestep named Forever Young, the theme was to get back in touch with our "innocent, childlike" self, our "inner child". One of the bioenergetic exercises was to lay down on a mattress on the floor as they played the song Mother by John Lennon extremely loud and peers were told to sit around the mattress yelling hurtful obscenities to make each student throw a more "intense tantrum" and "get out" the bad things we have piled on top of our "inner child"; our "innocence". When each student was finished, they crawled onto another mattress in the corner and were left alone for about 5-10 minutes to "cry and beg for forgiveness" to their inner child. Alex Bitz ran my Forever Young Lifestep. I lay down on my back as "Mother" began to play. Alex sat on the side on the mattress next to my head and put his head about half a foot above mine. He looked at me in the eyes and told me that I was so worthless that my birth mother did not want me, and my second parents did not want me, that he and the staff did not want me there and began to yell and ask me how that felt. I remember every detail of this, down to the spit coming out of his mouth onto my face, the way his goatee patch moved with every word. I threw my "tantrum", crawled to the next mattress and begged for water, which was not given to me, instead Alex told me that I was once again manipulating for special treatment. To this day I cannot hear the song "Mother" without feeling nauseous.

The Castle, about our "dark side". The bioenergetics were done to Neil Diamond songs, (who happened to be my parents' favorite singer and played frequently in my home). After a very long session of bioenergetics, we laid face down on a mattress in the middle of the floor, one at a time, with the students and staff surrounding. I was then completely covered by a large, heavy grey sheet and told to try to "break free of what kills your dreams and holds you down." I Am I Said played loudly on repeat as my peers and the staff held down the sheet over me and yelled and screamed obscenities as I had to struggle to push myself up to my knees.

I am shaking as I write this now. The feeling of claustrophobia and terror is something I will probably never get over. When I was finally allowed to "break free" those sheets were labeled as my cloak, and spray-painted with the word that "I tell myself that kills my inner child and holds me down." Mine was Worthless. We had to stand with these cloaks mummy-wrapped around us for several hours, facing our reflection in individual full length mirrors in front of us. We were denied bathroom access and a few of my peers urinated on themselves and still not allowed to move.

In Venture 1, after doing bio-energetics all night, we were blindfolded and walked outside in the backwoods to a steep hill, called "Hell Hill", where we were forced to continually run up and down until we came up with "the answer" that was to be the most important "theme" for us to "work on" for the rest of our stay. Of course, none of our answers were good enough and I was at the brink of passing out and was physically dragged up and down the hill, my knees and calves cut and scratched from branches and rocks.

Within a few months of my arrival at MBA, I began a relationship with a boy in my peer group. He was my first boyfriend. I was 13, and he was 17. He convinced me to go into the woods behind the dorms that the students weren't allowed to go, and I had my first intimate experience with him (no sexual intercourse). I had no idea about any of what I was doing with him, he showed me what to do and how to do it. We both felt guilty for keeping it a secret and confessed within a month, during a lifestep called Forever Young, in which we were told that "everything would be ok" and how proud they were of us that we confessed. However, after that, it was not ok. What followed was torture. The staff called in an "all school group". What ensued was over 6 straight hours of the entire student body screaming and yelling at me, calling me an idiot, a whore, a bitch, a slut, and more derogatory remarks.

The voices were deafening, and I hung my head in shame and put my hair over my face. I was then yelled at to put my face up and take responsibility for being the whore that I was. The young man and I were pushed to turn against each other and he, as well, yelled and screamed at me, calling me a slut and a whore, a worthless piece of shit, and telling me he never liked me. The staff encouraged the students to yell and scream obscenities at me, as is what happened in all of our groups, asking some of my close friends how it felt to be "totally betrayed by the slut who always acts like an innocent little girl." I was 13, and a virgin. Not once did any staff member explain or counsel me on healthy sexuality or relationships. Instead, I was immediately berated into thinking that I was dirty and worthless and that every sexual experience thereafter would increase my worthlessness. The image of that all school group scene has stayed with me, and has haunted me, like so many other memories from MBA.-----

As a result of my confession, I was put on a self-study. I was not allowed to speak or look at anyone, and forced to stare at the floor while walking and the wall while sitting at my desk in the corner. I was not allowed to go to any academic classes. I spent 6-8 hours digging a drainage ditch with limited water breaks. Being on Lithium at the time, this altered my brain chemistry severely and many times I felt symptoms of dehydration and sought help for which I was told to stop "manipulating to get out of work project" and forced to continue digging, in severe heat and in rain. I was to haul 76 wheelbarrows full of gravel and dirt up a gravel hill, down the dirt road, and empty it into the dirt pile before dark or I did not get to eat dinner. There were writing assignments, most of them being about how I was a bad person, how I manipulated people, why I was a slut, confess every lie I ever told anyone (called a dirt list), what horrible future would I have if I continued down this path, and more... I was forced to do dinner kitchen duty, cleaning dinner mess from the entire school completely by myself, a task that was usually assigned to a kitchen crew of 5 to 6 people. A staff member or staff intern would watch me and if I stopped for more than a minute or made too much noise, I would be yelled at and a day would be added to my punishment. I was treated as less-than-human, every single action I made completely controlled by staff-when I could talk to someone, when I could use the bathroom, drink water, basic human rights. In fact, my self-study was so harsh that my mentor at the time quit his job. Yet the brutal level of my self-study remained unchanged. A new staff member replaced him. I was on that self-study for 80 days.

I "graduated" the emotional growth program in December of 1991. The staff whom I had come to be dependent on promised to maintain contact and council me through the "transition" period, primarily the first 6 months home. I returned home stripped of my dignity, self-esteem, and self-respect. I did not tell my parents what had happened because I honestly did not know how to, I did not know that what they did was wrong, so I was ashamed and did not want them to know how "bad" I was there, as to deserve the punishment they gave me. We were told that nobody in "real world" would understand our experience, and would think we were crazy or lying if we tried to explain it. They drilled into our heads that they were the only people who loved us enough to show us the "truth", and the rest of the world was false and fake. They told all of the parents not to believe anything the kids said coming out of their experience, because we would be full of lies and stories that were not reality.

This is a very brief, partial summary of my time at MBA. What is written here does not scratch the surface of the wounds from that place. I lived out the manifestation of the person MBA made me believe I was. It was only after I found out MBA was shut down for child abuse that I began to talk about my experiences there. I was not even conscious of the fact that I never divulged any of the trauma to my friends and family, my therapist, my psychiatrists. Once I began to tell them, every person reacted the same way-shock, horror, then some form of acknowledgement and understanding, most people saying something to the effect of, "that really explains a lot". My therapist and my psychiatrist changed my previous diagnoses to PTSD.

Several of my friends from there have committed suicide. I have almost joined them, several times. I have suffered in silence for long enough. My son suffers from my trauma. I have isolated myself and never truly allowed myself the joy and peace of living in the moment, without analyzing each thing and being fearful of and distrusting people. I still tremble under my skin, constantly. I push people away. MBA stripped me of my soul. By breaking the silence and sharing my story, I am reclaiming my power and my soul.

I am so grateful for people like Senator Sara Gelser and Senator Mike McKell, as well their fellow lawmakers who finally hear survivors, believe us, and are working to make changes necessary to prevent another generation of trauma survivors from the "Troubled Teen" Industry. At 13, I wished, prayed, and hoped for people like you, who would come help kids like me. Thank you for being the heroes for the kids who are now in the shoes I wore, back then.