



TRAGEDY IN THE DESERT

SPECIAL REPORT



A Death at Outward Bound

After heatstroke claims a student in Utah's Canyon Country, the 46-year-old institution faces America's shrinking tolerance for risk. BY CHRISTOPHER KETCHAM

THE TEMPERATURE HAD HIT 104°F, yet the students continued down Lockhart Canyon to the Colorado River, where boats waited to take them into the cool of the water. To Elisa Santry, who had rarely been west of Boston and never known wilderness, Lockhart Canyon must have seemed a strange place. The walls were mudstone, formed in the Triassic period, the soft kind of rock that erodes into drips, blobs, grotesqueries: Here were ogling beasts the color of red wine or old blood, and troglodytic dwarves, and men with no necks, necks with no heads. The heat was nauseating, disorienting. It sucked at the resolve of 16-year-old Elisa, who was fair-skinned and thin-armed. The pack she wore, at 40-some pounds, was nearly half her body weight, but according to her letters, she was proud of carrying it. By dusk that day, July 16, 2006, Elisa was supposed to have completed the 16th day of a 22-day trek across the wilds of southern Utah as a student with Outward Bound, the premier wilderness school for young Americans. She was proud of that too.

Around 6 p.m., as the other students in her group made their way under the fading sun, instructors noticed that Elisa had disappeared. A search ensued, and for five hours the five remaining students and several instructors combed the canyon, donning headlamps after darkness fell. Finally, around 11 p.m., the instructors found Elisa facedown not far off the trail, her pack still shouldered. She was a half mile from the river.

Elisa was the first Outward Bound student to die in almost a decade and the 24th fatality in the nonprofit's 46-year history in the U.S. (most of those deaths occurred prior to 1980). The organization's response was a near-total silence about the

specifics of the case, but a small group of insiders broke form and spoke out, warning that Outward Bound's safety standards had fallen disturbingly low. When I contacted Elisa's mother, Elisa Woods, a few days after her daughter was found, she was outraged. "They told me my daughter was going to be well supervised . . . and she obviously wasn't," she said. "They killed my baby." The organization allowed no such notion: The wilderness killed Elisa Santry, spokesperson for the group told me, and, as a senior instructor in Moab put it, that is sometimes to be expected—a hardline ethic perhaps, but one that Outward Bound says will not change as a result of Elisa's death.

Named after the nautical term for a boat leaving its pier, Outward Bound was the brainchild of a progressive German educator

named Kurt Hahn, who wanted to raise survival rates among sailors at sea during World War II. His hope was to toughen young men's resolve through teamwork and compassion and a sense of shared mission. When Outward Bound came to the U.S., in 1961, its curriculum was adjusted to meet the American landscape head on: Every student

TERRA INCOGNITA: Elisa Santry in the hills near her home, in Boston (below). Above: The Outward Bound route in Lockhart Canyon followed an old jeep trail.



PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM TOP: WHIT RICHARDSON; MICHAEL WOODS

The names of some of the students in this article have been changed to protect their privacy.



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in Elisa's nine-person "patrol," for example, would summit a high peak, rappel a cliff, climb a rock face, live for weeks in the wilderness, and, as the climax of their experience, sojourn alone for two days in the rite of passage known as the "solo."

The success of Outward Bound in the U.S. spawned scores of imitators (I attended an Outward Bound type program when I was 14), and it remains the ur-wilderness school, with more than 680,000 participants to date. Elisa, a gifted student from the Southie neighborhood in Boston, had won a scholarship from Summer Search, a national nonprofit, to attend one of Outward Bound's most popular programs, combining mountaineering, canyoneering, and rafting. Elisa was to hike and raft some 180 miles over three weeks, through alpine tundra and hardwood forests into the red-rock canyons and the rivers beyond.

Her mother objected, worrying for a city girl's safety in a desert 2,000 miles away. In a family of three boys, Elisa, who had blond hair and was born with a lazy left eye, was the only daughter and the youngest child. "My miracle baby," Elisa Woods said. "I spent ten weeks in the hospital with that baby. She wasn't supposed to make it." Elisa's oldest brother, Michael Woods, 32, was thrilled for his sister, whom he had taken hiking in the

green hills outside Boston. Michael reassured his mother that Elisa would be in good hands. "My excitement for Elisa," he said, "was that she was going to have a truly wild experience in the American West."

They began the course in the La Sal Mountains east of Moab, nine teenagers and two instructors, dropped off by van at 8,000 feet in the aspen forests. Here there were black bears, rumors of cougars, and the sign of elk in the pine beds. A pounding rain and bleak thunderheads barred their way to the region's tallest peaks, so the group was forced to settle for a 11,600-footer they called "Mount Tapatio" (after a hot sauce they'd come to love).

According to a letter that instructor Rob Neilson, 26, later wrote to her family, Elisa was intrigued by the tools of survival. She learned how to route-find, use a compass, read a topo, march by starlight—to lead and trust to be led. She liked knots: the trucker's hitch and clove hitch for lashing her tarp as shelter in lieu of a tent, the figure-eight follow-through and water knot for tying into a top rope. She learned how to jury-rig a harness out of webbing, how to attack a rock face, and how to belay. But as the students experienced true wilderness for the first time, the instructors also taught them to be wary of it.

This was key to the lesson, according to Outward Bound: to watch out for the health of the group, to recognize the signs of hypothermia and dehydration and heat sickness.

The rigors of the expedition naturally wore on Elisa and her companions, enough that one of the girls quit on day four due to a stomach ailment. By day nine, one of the boys was forced to withdraw because of a nagging ankle injury. Another girl, a 17-year-old Californian named Karen, consistently lagged behind. For this, she was shunned by the four remaining boys with whom Elisa, on the other hand, had no trouble keeping pace. Karen was "not quite as intellectually and emotionally mature as the other students," Neilson wrote. Elisa remarked in her own letters that Karen had trouble tying shoelaces and sometimes sucked her thumb. Elisa took Karen under her wing "when no one else was willing to help," Neilson's letter said. "Elisa was always trying to coach [Karen] to do well, to be timely, and to work well with the group." She took weight from Karen's pack, helped her fold tarps, clean pots, tie knots. Perhaps she recognized in Karen something of her own experience, sensitized as she was to the condition of the outcast: As a child, Elisa was laughed at for her wandering eye and later underwent surgery to correct the condition.

If Elisa's letters home are to be believed,

TIME LINE**Lost in Lockhart**

July 16, 2006, 12:30 p.m.

An Outward Bound (OB) group consisting of two girls and four boys enters Lockhart Canyon for a seven-mile hike to the Colorado River. Rob Neilson, the lead guide, walks ahead, while Alex, the secondary guide, acts as "sweeper." (1)

2:30 p.m.

Mike DeHoff, director of OB's Southwest Region Program, passes the students while hiking up the canyon and notices nothing amiss. (2)

4:45 p.m.

The student patrol agrees to split up; the four boys hike ahead and the two girls, Elisa Santry and Karen, follow. (3)

5:15 p.m.

Alex finds Karen wandering the trail alone; Elisa is nowhere in sight. (4)

5:20 p.m.

The boys arrive at the river. (5)

6 p.m.

Alex and Karen meet Rob and a search for Elisa begins. (6)

11 p.m.

Elisa's body is found in a side canyon a quarter mile off-trail. (7)



MAP BY COMPUTER TERRAIN MAPPING

the group's overall dynamic was less than ideal. Weeks in dusty tents and around campfires with nine unwashed strangers either leads to group coherence—a sense of shared mission, a brotherhood, a sisterhood—or group dysfunction and the breaking apart into cliques. Elisa's patrol, it seems, quietly broke apart. The boys had too much "attitude" and seemed to share a contempt for the girls, according to Elisa in her letters home (Stan from Colorado "used to be nice," John from Wisconsin had "his mood swings"). Elisa at the same time failed to bond with the other girls. "The girls hike really slow," she wrote. Tina from California is described as "soo mean and aggravating." As for Karen, she "always complains." "I complain also," Elisa wrote on the 11th day of the trip, "but try to stop."

By the 11th day, the kids had reason to complain. There was a heat wave across the Southwest, and in southern Utah the temperatures rose in tandem with the patrol's descent from the juniper forests into the canyons. In the fluted narrows and under the high rims of West Coyote Gulch, 17 miles south of Moab, the group settled in for the long loneliness of the solo. Elisa, per the



REMEMBRANCE: A photo of Elisa in her mother's home, in South Boston.

Outward Bound tradition, was allowed only minimal food, water, a pen, a journal, a sleeping bag, and a sleeping pad—alone for two nights with her thoughts, the cliffs, the heat, the darkness. "She said that at night, solo was really hard," wrote Neilson. Of the many letters Elisa penned in this solitude, there was one

that she was instructed to write to herself and not read until six months had passed—this was also tradition. The note was dated July 11, and, given that it was the last thing Elisa Santry ever wrote, her family would not share it.

On the morning of July 16, four days after her solo, Elisa didn't eat much—just some nuts and crackers, according to Outward Bound. It was probably the heat. That day was to be one of the patrol's most demanding and rewarding, a seven-mile traverse of Lockhart Canyon to rafts waiting at the Colorado River; the culmination of eight hard days in the aridness of the Canyonlands basin.

The hike down Lockhart would be completed as a group, but without instructors present, with only their maps, compasses, and wits. The route was a simple one, an old jeep road that followed the drainage of the canyon, to the sun-smashed cottonwoods and stands of tamarisk along the river. Neilson, as lead instructor, would walk on ahead, while the second instructor, a woman who Outward Bound will only identify as Alex, would act as "sweeper," trailing the group far behind to ensure that there would be no stragglers. Neilson and Alex issued the standard protocol:

PHOTOGRAPH BY RENEE DEKONA/THE BOSTON HERALD

The patrol was to stay together at all times. The kids were provided ample food and water. Neilson and Alex were also not the only adults in the area. Tina, who Elisa had found so intolerably “mean,” had sprained her ankle on a rappel and had to be trucked out. To help with the evacuation, the organization’s top man in Utah, Mike DeHoff, director of the Southwest Region Program, had piloted down the Colorado River by boat and was hiking up Lockhart Canyon.

By afternoon, however, the protocol in Elisa’s patrol started to unravel. DeHoff, for his part, said he noticed nothing amiss when he passed by the group on his way up canyon. There were two girls remaining of the original four—Elisa and Karen—and four impatient boys. After DeHoff had passed, Elisa at one point started weeping, according to Karen, the only member of the group Elisa’s family has been able to contact.

The Needles ranger station in nearby Canyonlands National Park marked a temperature of 104°F that afternoon. In the furnace effect of the canyon, the temperature was likely closer to 110. The effort to walk under the roaring sun was apparently too much for Elisa. She’d eaten almost nothing

all day. She asked to take a rest break. She then requested another. It was late afternoon, the crest of the day’s heat. There were one-and-a-quarter miles to the respite at the river.

The four boys later told Outward Bound investigators that a group decision was made at 4:45—the patrol would disband. The boys headed out and left the two girls to be swept up by Alex in the rear.

bottles of water. What is most perplexing is the route she chose after she left Karen. She abandoned the jeep road altogether and walked a quarter mile south into a side canyon. Was she lost? The jeep road and drainage is clearly blazed at that point in the canyon. Had she lost her ability to reason? Heat exhaustion can lead to disorientation; heatstroke guarantees it. Both conditions

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Elisa and Karen proceeded for a short while. Then the story clouds up. According to Karen, who was the last person to see her alive, Elisa now opted to strike out down canyon alone. Alex says she found Karen around 5:15 p.m., wandering down the middle of the jeep road.

As for Elisa, we can only guess what happened. We know that she had enough food with her and that she started the day with two

result from a rise in the body’s core temperature, and both can strike even if a hiker is hydrated, though heatstroke is deadly. Elisa walked up the side canyon with its weird mudstone walls, the rocks too hot to touch. Then she fell to her knees and pitched forward onto her face. A trickle of blood ran from her mouth. There she died, probably within minutes. The medical examiner later ruled “probable heatstroke” as the cause of death. >

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A day later, on July 17, a 29-year-old man named David Buschow died, reportedly of dehydration and electrolyte imbalance, on a wilderness survival program in Utah run by the Boulder Outdoor Survival School, of Boulder, Colorado. The two fatalities, one right after the other, made national headlines, and in the Santry case led Utah officials to review Outward Bound. Utah regulations prohibit compulsory outdoor programs that treat delinquent or troubled individuals from hiking in temperatures above 90°F, but groups that run voluntary programs, such as Outward Bound, function beyond the state's purview. "We took another look at Outward Bound," says LJ Dustman, supervisor for the licensing of Utah's outdoor programs. "But by definition they operate outside of our jurisdiction."

Richard "Rocky" Grossack of Boston, one of the lawyers hired by Elisa's family, sees an avenue for litigation, despite the fact that students and their parents are required to sign an extensive release form. "My goal," Grossack says, "is to get the family money. Why were the campers hiking in those conditions when the regulations suggest that you shouldn't? Having a kid hike in 110-degree heat, in a canyon, with a backpack that's nearly half her weight, without appropriate supervision checking in on her is gross negligence—and by that I mean negligence that was disgusting." Mickey Freeman, president of Outward Bound Wilderness and its top official fielding press inquiries about the incident, counters that the organization has "been operating similar trips in the same area during the same time of year for about 25 years without a heat-related fatality or, to our knowledge, a serious heat-related incident." He later elaborated, saying, "Our instructors made the right decisions and acted within our policies and guidelines."

Still, investigators with the San Juan County sheriff's office, which has jurisdiction in the Santry case, say that Outward Bound "has been less than cooperative." At press time, the organization had refused to divulge to investigators the names of the other students and the instructors—the key witnesses to what really happened in Lockhart Canyon. Nor would Outward Bound share the results of their own internal probe with the sheriff's investigators or Elisa's family. The sheriff's office considered issuing subpoenas to Outward Bound in late 2006. As of mid-March 2007 the organization still had not disclosed the results of its February 12 internal investigation.

Nonetheless, John Read, the president of Outward Bound USA, says the incident has deeply impacted his organization. He now has a picture of Elisa Santry hanging in his office. "A day doesn't go by that we don't think about Elisa," Read wrote in an October 2006 email to Michael Woods, Elisa's brother who has spearheaded the family's own investigation. "We have remembered her and celebrated her life and grieved her loss in so many ways."

Yet avowed sorrow does not translate into an admission of wrongdoing, nor apparently will it catalyze sweeping change at Outward Bound. After the organization completed its internal investigation, Freeman insisted that the report, whose purpose "was not to assess whether anyone acted negligently or was at fault," recommended "that we reexamine our heat-related travel protocols." And even in regard to temperature limits for travel, Freeman noted, "we want to carefully balance setting absolute limits versus relying on instructor judgment."

This, according to former and current Outward Bound employees, may be flawed policy in light of current training procedures. A former high-level Outward Bound program director, who asked to remain anonymous, says that after the organization's Pacific Crest and Colorado Schools merged in 2003, its risk-management procedures were pushed to the margins. The staff from the Colorado School, which for years had a higher accident rate than other schools, according to the former director, assumed control of training at the new entity, now called Outward Bound Wilderness. "Instructors need to know how to corral students to a safe zone, how to manage big groups on a top-rope, how to persevere in a state of trouble, how to assess equipment, terrain, weather," says the former director, who resigned in the wake of the merger. "These things seemed to be missing from Outward Bound Wilderness. There was no sense of mentorship. There was no interest in maintaining an institutional standard for the application of written support material such as course area guidebooks and instructor manuals. And there was a huge lack of assessment of instructors' competence."

The merger, according to some former employees, also depressed morale, spurring an exodus of senior field instructors and program directors, who were replaced by younger staff. "People just saw the quality deteriorate," says the former director. "I believe in Outward Bound. I was a student at 18 and it changed my life. Risk in nature is

an incredible teacher—it teaches boundaries. But today Outward Bound isn't teaching boundaries. And the dangers have spiraled out of control."

In December 2006 Arthur M. Blank, chairman of the board of Outward Bound USA, announced plans to donate one million dollars to fund a professionalized training institute for field instructors. According to Outward Bound, plans for the institute were underway prior to Elisa's death, and the donation was unrelated to the incident. "This will help us build a deeper instructor bench," says Freeman. "We'll start to see the work this year."

Still, the question remains: Even with a renewed commitment to risk management, has Outward Bound's wilderness philosophy, a philosophy forged in the American wilds in the 1960s, fallen out of step with society and, in particular, the risk aversion of modern parents? A 1991 study found that the radius around the home where parents allowed nine-year-olds to wander had shrunk to one-ninth of what it had been in 1970. Fear of risk—and of litigation—drives suburban homeowners to abide by "covenants" that prohibit basketball in streets, marbles-play on sidewalks, and fort-building in nearby woods. In California, Girl Scouts are often restricted from climbing trees at camp. The notion that accidents happen—especially fatal ones—is simply at odds with what most parents today are willing to accept.

"This is much larger than Outward Bound, it's what is happening to us as a society," says Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*. "For almost the entirety of human history, children spent most of their time either playing or working in nature." That era, says Louv, may be coming to an end in the U.S. For this reason alone, supporters argue, Americans need Outward Bound now more than ever.

Elisa's family could not agree less. They want to know why she died, and they have yet to receive a clear answer from the organization's executives. Though Freeman continues to insist that "Outward Bound's number one priority is safety," even current employees disagree. "Outward Bound doesn't have a culture of safety," says a veteran instructor. "The leadership of Outward Bound is not being held accountable. In turn, they aren't holding the program directors and instructors accountable." Elisa's brother Michael asks an anguished question in this regard: Where were the instructors when Elisa was dying in Lockhart Canyon? ▲