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Turning British brats into Utah saints

Josh thinks about stabbing his dad. Alex has been expelled and is totally out of control. Will transporting them to a draconian ranch in the middle of Utah help turn them into model teenagers, asks Daniel Lee

Tuesday February 15, 2005



As slogans go, "forward not back", is about as vacuous as you can get. "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime", on the other hand, makes it clear that we are obsessed with anti-social behaviour, crime and punishment, which is why Britain jails more people than most other democracies. This obsession also lurks behind Channel 4's TV series Brat Camp, which shows Utah cowboys applying a short, sharp shock to try to correct the behaviour of seven offensive, and sometimes violent, British teenagers.



Lasso practice at Turnabout Ranch.

But don't run away with the idea that the Brat Camp children come from tough backgrounds. They all seem to come from nice, middle class homes with caring, thoughtful parents, but something has gone drastically wrong. Take 15-year-old Josh. "One day I might think, oh fuck it, I'm going to go and stab my Dad," he says. "I get really, really angry and smoke dope every day. Last year I was going to school about three times a week."

He lives in north London with his parents and two younger sisters. He has a history of violent rages against his family. His father, Sean, explains: "He will punch me to the head and those punches do hurt. Josh is so unpredictable. You live in fear of what he is going to do next. Because he doesn't achieve the things he's capable of achieving I think the frustration will lead to more violence and he will end up somewhere he shouldn't be."

Then there's Alex. She's also 15 years old and out of control. "I don't think there is any point in going out drinking unless you are going to get absolutely hammered," she says. She boasts about her anti-social behaviour. "I think I'm in control of my relationship with my mum. I'll smash things and throw things. I'm expelled so I don't go to school. I've got in trouble with the police quite a few times."

Alex lives with her mother, Lisa, and her parents are separated. Her school report reads: "In the experience of the staff who worked with Alex, her behaviour was not typical teenage behaviour. Alex showed by her attitude and behaviour that she was outside the school's control as well as beyond the control of her mother."

In desperation, the parents of Josh and Alex, as well as the five other teenagers, have sent them to Turn About Ranch in Utah to try to turn them into decent human beings. It subjects teenagers to a strict regime on courses costing £15,000 for 90 days. These are aimed at resetting socially acceptable boundaries for adolescents who have lost all sense of right and wrong. It is a working ranch and a lot of the course is spent at the Roundy Camp, a traditional, frontier-style environment with a log cabin, barn and chicken house.

The ranch's executive director, Max Stewart, embodies its tough approach. He was a cattleman and farmer and then served in the US army as a military policeman and a drill sergeant. "It is designed to take the rebellious, selfish, undisciplined, defiant or unmotivated youth and strip him or her of old defences, attitudes and facades," he explains. "No free time is allotted, and each youth is directed, taught, encouraged, confronted and held accountable for his or her every action."

Many of the rules are draconian. Wake-up time is 6.30am, various chores must be completed by 8.30am and there is a long list of banned activities, including smoking, drinking alcohol and swearing. Students must ask permission before doing anything and even their personal appearance is rigidly controlled. The teenagers are not allowed any make-up, hair products, jewellery or money, girls' hair must be in a pony tail and boys must be clean shaven.

The rules are relaxed gradually only if the teenager's behaviour improves. The ranch greets bad behaviour with what it calls "impact". This means rules can become even stricter, enforcing an earlier wake-

up time, for example.

Contact with parents is strictly limited, although they will usually attend a two-day counselling session at the ranch about half way through the programme. Parents can, however, call a 24-hour telephone line or check a dedicated website to find out about their children.

To critics, this could seem like a form of bullying, but Chris Fudge, one of Mr Stewart's fellow directors, emphasises that the rules are designed to teach the teenagers that only good behaviour is rewarded and to emphasise the importance of living with social awareness, particularly in a family context.

"A family, the Townsends, set up the ranch when they were looking for a better environment that would create success with youths," Mr Fudge says. "With the family's background in ranching they knew the ranch environment promotes strong values, such as honesty, respect, and teamwork. They knew this would be good for youths to learn and become responsible, and accountable young adults.

"We want to create healthier young adults," Fudge explains. "Our mission statement is: Empowering our students with traditional Christian values of honesty, openness, respect, teamwork, and accountability in order to instill a positive, responsible, cooperative attitude and to prepare them for successfully living within their family, community, school, and society."

Bearing in mind this mission statement, the harsh codes of conduct are balanced with emotional support. Mr Stewart is a licensed social worker and the rest of the team includes teachers and counsellors.

All the ideas sound very noble, but do they work? The project has expanded from 24 students in 2000 to 37 students per programme in 2004 and it now deals with 130 teenagers each year. Nine of these came from the UK last year and the organisers estimate that their success rate for sorting out teenagers is approximately 80%. As for the seven Brits, Channel 4 and the ranch say you'll have to wait until the end of the five-part series to find out if are they have returned to their old habits or if they have been reborn.

- Daniel Lee is writer and editor of the Brat Camp website.

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