

May 5-11, 2024

A TRIBUNE SPECIAL REPORT

Wilderness therapy's rocky path forward

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The Salt Lake Tribune

PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

Nearly half the outdoor therapy programs in Utah closed in the past year, as the industry faces a future clouded by abuse allegations spread on social media and new competition.

By JESSICA MILLER | The Salt Lake Tribune

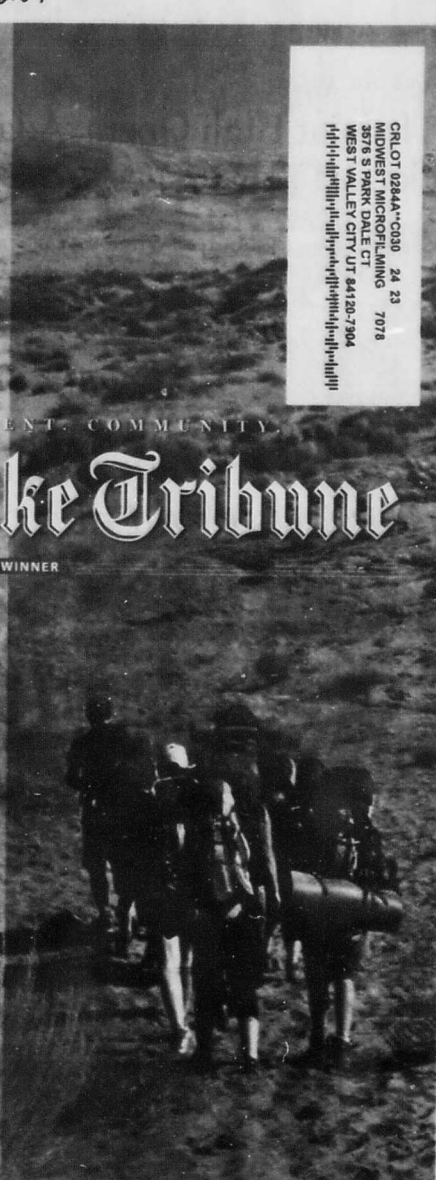
With its sweeping desert vistas, millions of acres of public lands to hike through and forest-friendly laws around who can make medical decisions for teenagers, Utah became known as the place to send so-called "troubled teens" for wilderness therapy.

For decades, the state fostered the growth of an industry that made its money on a promise that time spent in the outdoors — and far away from home — would help a child struggling with behavioral issues or substance abuse.

But the wilderness therapy industry is now struggling. It hasn't since the early 2000s, when national scrutiny followed the death of a number of young people in outdoor settings, including five teenagers in Utah, many of whom died of heart-related illness while hiking in the desert.

Photo by THE TRIBUNE

Team and guides, right, leave Peaches Adventure Park at 7,000 ft. in the Utah desert. The wilderness therapy program for troubled teens is now less popular, but the industry is still growing.



JIM UNGRUBART | Tribune file photo

Broken cranes, blizzards, spooked workers

Lift installer sued Wasatch Peaks Ranch over problematic job, now says it was 'misunderstanding'

By JULIE JAG | The Salt Lake Tribune

The project saw construction delays almost from the start. Setbacks followed. Roads flooded. A crane boom crumpled. A ski lift tower, weighing between 6,000-12,000 pounds, toppled to the ground after its anchor bolts allegedly weren't tightened.

Yet it wasn't until another ski lift tower unhooked from its tether to a Blackhawk helicopter and came thundering down through the trees onto the work site that Highlander Ski Lifts workers walked out on the Wasatch Peaks Ranch job.

The installation of the first two lifts at the new private

luxury ski and golf resort in Morgan County in 2021 did not go smoothly.

On that, all parties agreed. What the resort and Highlander disagreed on, however, was who bore the fault for the rocky installation, which resulted in cost overruns of more than \$1 million and in Wasatch Peaks Ranch operating just one lift for most of its maiden 2021-22 season. Not until closing day was the second lift finally cleared to carry passengers.

The dispute boiled over into Morgan County's 2nd District Court in December 2022. For one year, the two sides flung

barbs at each other in the form of sharply worded claims and counterclaims. Each accused the other of not holding up their end of the contract, of causing delays that pushed the project deep into winter, and of putting workers in danger. Both sought close to \$1 million in damages.

Yet, following a brief meeting last month, Wasatch Peaks and Highlander have suddenly reversed course. The whole ordeal, they now say, "was mostly a misunderstanding."

Those were the words of Highlander President Paul Johnston. In late March, he joined one of Wasatch Peaks' primary owners as well as

Photo by WPS DISPUTE, AS



FRANCISCO KJOLSTEN | The Salt Lake Tribune

Problems with placement of ski lifts prompted workers to walk off the job at Wasatch Peaks Ranch, but a rift between the ski-lift company and resort ownership has been mended.

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