

Woman Says She Was Brainwashed While Student at Mountain Park

Mountain Park Baptist Boarding Academy in rural Patterson is located in a secluded area of Wayne County. In the quiet countryside the staff works to transform troubled teens into responsible upstanding adults through education and ministry.

School officials do not seek publicity. The school does not grant interviews to the media. School officials have, on occasion, spoken to various civic organizations in Wayne County.

Mountain Park students are seldom seen in public. The school has a noted music program. During the Christmas season, Mountain Park students perform at Clark's Mountain Nursing Center, the Patterson Country Christmas Festival, and the Piedmont Country Christmas festivities.

The school, which does not like media attention, has gained nationwide attention. A former student is featured in the May issue of Glamour magazine. Teana Zeller, 23, of Las Vegas tells of her two-year experience at Mountain Park. In the interview, she claims she was brainwashed, forbidden to make friends, read virtually any book but the Bible, or even walk outside alone.

Two former Mountain Park students recently e-mailed the school to express their praise of the school. One of the students had read the Glamour article.

DRP wrote of Zeller's story, "it was horrible and untrue." DRP says that since attending Mountain Park her life has been going well. She is engaged and recently graduated from Ultrasound Diagnostic School as a medical assistant.

"I wanted to say thank you for letting Christ shine so brightly in your lives and in your ministry," wrote CNE. "I pray often for Mountain Park and the lives that are changed through you. I can now look back over the year that I was there and say it is the best thing that happened to me, besides the fact that Jesus Saves!!! God Bless You All!!!"

Even though DRP and CNE praise the school, Zeller says she remains traumatized from her experience at Mountain Park. She says she is unable to develop friendships with females or lasting relationships with males. Zeller says she attempted to attend college, but wasn't able to succeed. She said she did not learn adequate study skills due to the educational process at Mountain Park.

Zeller was at Mountain Park for two years. During her stay at the school she was unable to watch television, listen to the radio, send an uncensored letter, or hold a private conversation. Her most vivid memory of the school is holding down another student so she could be paddled.

Zeller is "holding down a terrified blond teenager so that Mama, as the headmistress of her private boarding school is known, can beat her," the Glamour article states. "Mama's vic-

tim remains defiantly mute as the long oak paddle connects with a firm smack to her buttocks, again and again. Teana struggles to ignore the harsh sound. She stares at a cabinet. She examines the packages on the desk. Anything to avoid focusing on the scene before her."

"That girl's face is etched permanently on my mind," Zeller stated. "To think that I had held someone down so she could be beaten... She was punished for being scared and I have to live with the thought that I collaborated."

Zeller says she was never spanked during her stay at the school. She said she abided by the school's rules. She stayed silent when ordered to keep her eyes down. She tore up pictures of her old friends and she stayed within the confines of the building.

Teana Zeller was sent to Mountain Park in 1994. According to the Glamour magazine, Zeller was sent to the school because her parents had been having problems with her for four months.

"Teana and her mother began arguing," the article stated. Her mother "worried her daughter was hanging out with the wrong crowd. I had to do something to keep her safe." She'd suspected—correctly, Zeller now admits, that her daughter had started drinking alcohol. And Teana had run away twice to the homes of family friends, though she had never run afoul of the law or experimented with drugs."

Zeller says her mother picked Mountain Park on the recommendation of a friend. They knew nothing of the school firsthand. Her mother did call several parents who were referred by the school. The Glamour article said Zeller's mother was impressed and "signed a contract sight unseen to keep Teana at Mountain Park for a full year, at \$900 a month."

Teana said she knew immediately upon her arrival at Mountain Park that it was not a normal school. Girls were dressed in long skirts or culottes with baggy T-shirts. They stood around reading the Bible.

"When she tried to strike up casual conversation, Teana was abruptly told that for at least three months she could not talk to anyone but her student-orientation guide or selected students approved by the administration," the article stated. "New girls are poisoned by the ways of the outside world," she recalls her guide explaining.

"I knew something was weird, but I wasn't sure what it was at first. It was like going back to the nineteenth century or some other area and being told that you had to forget your old life, that everything you'd done before was evil."

She could not wear jeans. Pants aren't permitted at Mountain Park. Zeller couldn't read romance novels; secular novels aren't permitted. She



Teana Zeller

...Featured in Glamour Magazine

couldn't listen to Pearl Jam or Gloria Estefan because secular music is prohibited. She also couldn't dance, which was one of her passions.

Her new life consisted of a "daily grind of prayers, chores and religious training—with high school academics thrown in. Teana's day began with 15 minutes of devotions in the dorm before breakfast. Then she and her classmates would file into their schoolroom, filled with rows of desks with high dividers between them. Although Mountain Park advertised a college-preparatory curriculum, students were not taught by grade level and there were no formal classes led by teachers, except for a few electives. Rather, students used self-paced home-schooling workbooks to cover the standard subjects. When you finished a unit, you perched a flag on your desk—an American flag if you were ready to grade your own work; a red, blue and white Christian flag if you needed adult assistance."

"Five evenings a week, the girls were marched to church, Bible study or devotions. On Etiquette Nights, they were bombarded with admonitions about the godliness of feminine submissiveness and the dangers of lust. 'We were taught to be good Baptist preachers' wives and that the women's opinions don't matter.' The lesson, as she interpreted it, was that women's desires were so valueless, women shouldn't even bother to vote."

Parents were not permitted to visit their children during their first four months at Mountain Park. Students

couldn't go home for the first year. Students were never allowed outside alone. Privacy was obliterated. Parents could call twice a month, but the calls were monitored for time. Letters students wrote were read by staff before they were mailed. At night students took turns standing watch at the exits.

"Everything was taken away from me," Zeller recounts. "I couldn't write my old friends, but we weren't allowed to make new ones."

She also claims the school staff told students that their parents no longer wanted them. The Mountain Park staff became their family.

"They used that to manipulate us, to look for whatever security you had in you and tear it down," Zeller said.

She claims students were ridiculed and belittled. Girls who went to the bathroom too much were forced to wear toilet paper necklaces. If "Mama" thought a student was too heavy they were put on a diet and the rest of the students were told that person was fat and lazy.

"Every day I heard how awful and horrible I was, how ugly and stupid," Zeller told Glamour. "After a while, you start to believe them."

Zeller says that some students couldn't cope. She remembers one 12-year-old couldn't stop crying. She was forced to wear a pacifier around her neck and carry around a low footstool. Another student desperate to escape jumped into the swimming pool in midwinter, screaming "Let me die!" Zeller says she survived on sheer pragmatism.

While she was a student at Mountain Park, the school was rocked by a murder within its ranks. A 15-year-old student from Florida was murdered by three fellow students. The 15-year-old was murdered because it was believed he was going to reveal a plot by the three male students.

She graduated from Mountain Park two months after her 18th birthday. She received the Outstanding Christian Leadership Award. Zeller said she was filled with grief when she left the school.

"Mama and Papa were my fam-

ily," Zeller told Glamour. "They gave me a home. They loved me." But at the same time she says the school wasn't a positive experience.

"I'd lived in isolation for so long, every waking minute controlled by somebody else, that I didn't know what freedom was anymore," Zeller said. "I was afraid to go out into the world. (Back home in Las Vegas) I threw out every piece of clothing, every record album, book or anything else Mama would have disapproved of."

She claims Mountain Park had not trained her to cope with the world. She hadn't read a newspaper, a magazine or a secular novel in two years. She hadn't seen television during that time. She knew nothing of the Internet revolution.

Zeller enrolled at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, but it was a struggle because she wasn't prepared for college. She says she had never been involved in a class discussion or written a term paper. She dropped out after a year and a half.

Since then she has been adrift. She

has held several different jobs and gone through four serious relationships. She says that Mountain Park is the reason.

"From the ages of 15 to 18, most kids in the world learn how to have friends, how to relate to boys," Zeller told Glamour. "But instead of learning how to have relationships, I was learning how to survive—how not to look a boy in the eye; how not to hug or touch, so I wouldn't get swatted with the paddle; how not to talk to any one girl too much so that I wouldn't be separated."

Zeller says it has taken her nearly four years to come to grips with her Mountain Park experience. "Until a year ago, I would have defended Mountain Park," she told Glamour. "It has taken me this long to realize that they can't control me anymore."

"Whenever she dons a particularly skimpy dress, or jeans and a top that leaves her midriff bare, she says the old messages start to play in her head," the article read. "'You're a slut and a horrible person. You're evil. You're going to hell.'"

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