A Mighty Change: The Influence of Larry Dean Olsen on the Evolution of Wilderness Therapy

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Abstract

This article presents a biographical narrative of Larry Dean Olsen and his significant degree of influence on the field of wilderness therapy. It reviews his influence through literature and interviews, highlighting his contributions of founding the primitive skills model of wilderness therapy, advocating a non-punitive approach to wilderness therapy treatment, and working with state regulators and insurance companies to develop standards for the field.

Introduction

The field of wilderness therapy is currently under scrutiny by U.S. government officials, media, and researchers due to isolated cases of death, abuse, and deception in marketing of some wilderness therapy programs (Government Accounting Office report, 2007; 2008; Szalavitz, 2006). Punitive practices in any form are not an acceptable treatment approach to the majority of modern practitioners of wilderness therapy, yet during the 1980’s and early 1990’s many wilderness programs were punitive in nature (Krakauer, 1995). Currently wilderness therapy has evolved to recognize the need for review by practitioners and regulators with the intent on ensuring the physical and emotional safety of participants, preventing deception, as well as acknowledging the professional growth of the field.

One way to clarify these issues is to identify how and why wilderness therapy emerged and evolved through initial programs, major influences, and pioneers of the field. Such information can shed light on how abusive practices occurred in the field and can be avoided in the future. This information is obviously critical as the field of wilderness therapy is currently under review by government officials investigating abuse and neglect in programs with the intention of increasing program regulation to a federal level (GAO report, 2007; 2008). It is important for present day practitioners of wilderness
therapy to learn about the field’s history in order to understand some of the root causes for the criticisms of the field. This will also aid in joint efforts to work with regulators to move the professional field forward in its mission to help clients grow safely and productively through the experience of wilderness therapy experiences.

In researching the evolution of all major historical influences on wilderness therapy, this article focuses on how one person, Larry Dean Olsen, founded the utilization of the primitive skills model as one approach to wilderness therapy. When researching the history of wilderness therapy, Larry’s name consistently surfaces as an individual who started programs in the 1960’s and has been a consistent vocal proponent of a non-punitive approach to work with participants.

Several major influences have been identified in the development of wilderness therapy (Russell and Hendee, 2000). They include the: (1) early therapeutic camping models, (2) wilderness challenge and rites-of-passage models, (3) primitive skills programs, (4) adjudicated programs, (5) professionalism of AEE, TAPG, OBHIC, (6) scholarly influences producing recognition, (7) recognition by insurance companies and state agencies. Of these seven major influences on the development of the field, two directly involve Larry Dean Olsen. Larry is the founder of primitive skills programs, as well as being instrumental in having programs recognized by insurance companies and state agencies. Olsen is cited in books (Szalavitz, 2006), articles (Krakauer, 1995; Adams, 1999), and research (Russell & Hendee, 2000) related to wilderness therapy treatment. Although some researchers of the history of wilderness therapy failed to recognize Olsen (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Davis-Berman & Berman, 2008), he has been cited by others as founding, influencing, or developing many of the primitive skills wilderness therapy programs in existence today including the ANASAZI Foundation, SUWS, and Aspen Achievement Academy (Krakauer 1995; Russell & Hendee, 2000). In February of 2008 Larry was awarded the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs Leadership Award for his positive influence on the field, which includes his strong advocacy for non-punitive approach to treatment.

What influenced Larry Dean Olsen to develop primitive skills
programs and how did that evolve into a form of wilderness therapy? What was the field like when he first started and how does it compare to today? What is his philosophy in treating participants and how did that influence participants, licensure, and insurance reimbursement as well as modern day practices? In order to answer these questions, the researcher in this study used a literature review of wilderness therapy and Larry Dean Olsen, an interview with Larry, interviews with practitioners in the field, and an interview with Ezekiel Sanchez with Larry.

**Introduction to Larry Dean Olsen**

Michael Merchant, Executive Director of the ANASAZI Foundation, provided me (the researcher) with a verbal introduction to Larry. I called Larry to explain my professional background of starting an expeditionary model wilderness therapy program in Maine and how I became interested in pursuing the history of the evolution of the field. Larry stated that he “would be more than happy to help.” I was fortunate to interview him on the phone, and then a month later at the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (NATSAP) Conference where he received the organization’s Leadership Award. When I met Larry I was struck by his presence, humility, and kindness. Larry looks younger than his nearly 70 years with graying hair, clear eyes, and a pleasant smile. He had recently returned with his wife to the United States after two years teaching English in Burma. Larry shared wonderful stories of their time living with the Burmese people. We spent several hours talking alone and with his long time co-founder, Ezekiel Sanchez, about how they became involved in what is now referred to as wilderness therapy.

**Origins of the Primitive Skills School**

Larry explained that the origins of his entry into this field started as a young boy growing up in Wendell, Idaho. “I had learned survival skills as I grew up as a young boy in the desert of southern Idaho.” When Larry showed his sixth grade teacher, Miss Romain, an obsidian arrowhead he had found, she encouraged him by giving him a book about primitive Indians and survival skills. Larry recalled, “That night I read, visions came and, when the sun came up, I had finished the whole book! I knew then, for sure, where my trail was going.
It led to canyons, mesas, desert wastelands and ancient stomping grounds. I spent most of my time as a kid in the desert experimenting with skills.” From that point on Larry, “began reading everything I could find on Indians.” In 1962 Larry enrolled at Brigham Young University to pursue a bachelor’s degree in elementary education. “When I arrived at Brigham Young University (BYU) I discovered a lot of people were interested in primitive skills so I started a little non-credit evening course in the Special Courses and Conferences Department, titled “Outdoor Survival Skills.” The course caught on very quickly and was doing very well. Then after a year or two of teaching the non-credit class parents in the community started to hear about what I was teaching and would ask me to take out youth groups such as Boy Scouts and high school groups... After taking out the groups the parents would ask me, ‘What did you do to my kid? He eats everything on his plate; he is nice to his mother. He is doing well in school’”…those sorts of things.’ And I noted that things were changing there even though all I was interested in was teaching the skills.”

In 1967 Larry graduated BYU with an elementary education degree and completed writing a comprehensive book on survival skills. In the spring of 1967 Larry Dean Olsen’s *Outdoor Survival Skills* was published by the BYU Printing Press. The publication of *Outdoor Survival Skills* and his classes at BYU established Larry as one of the country’s leading experts in the field of outdoor survival. The actor and director Robert Redford was so impressed with *Outdoor Survival Skills* that Larry was hired to be a consultant for the film, *Jeremiah Johnson* (Olsen, 1973). Redford wrote the Forward to the fourth edition of the book. The book is currently in its sixth edition.

In the summer of 1967 Larry was invited by the Colorado Outward Bound School to teach their staff about survival skills. Larry explained, “I took a month or two that summer and went to their school and watched. I was not particularly interested in their curriculum, but I watched their ways of doing things and they did have a lot of success with getting people out in the wilderness and bringing them back safely.” Larry had been taking people out on survival trips for 10 days at a time while Outward Bound trips were typically 28 days. “I thought, ‘Now I have got to do some survival expeditions
because I knew it was safe to take people out for long periods of time.’ So I incorporated some features and started a program at BYU as an experiment’.

**A Mighty Change**

In 1968 the Academic Standards Committee at BYU asked Larry to take 26 students who had failed out of BYU the previous semester on a month long primitive skills class. This class was titled the “480 Survival Program” and its purpose was to give failing students an opportunity for readmission to BYU. Larry explained, “Academic Standards (at BYU) gave me 26 students who had flunked out of school the previous semester and told them if they would go with me for a one semester class into the desert and literally come back alive they could come back to school the next semester, as well as give them five credits to boot. So we did that. I took 26 students for a month out in the desert near Blanding, Utah and Ezekiel Sanchez was one of those students.”

Ezekiel Sanchez explained that he worked hard in order to get into BYU, but was ill prepared for the rigors of academic life. In 1968 after being academically suspended from BYU, he went back to work as a laborer on the rail lines and realized how he had lost a great opportunity. He explained, “One morning I woke up and said I would not eat or drink until I found a way back to BYU.” At the end of the following day he received a letter from BYU. Ezekiel explained “The letter was written something like this: ‘Dear Academic Drop Out, My name is Larry Olsen and I am inviting you to be a guinea pig to go on a primitive survival class. If you make it out alive you can return back to BYU on probation status.’ To me this was the answer to what I was seeking.” Ezekiel enrolled in the class.

Ezekiel explained his first meeting with Larry. “At the time Larry wore glasses that looked like Coca-Cola bottles. He was not an impressive individual, he did not look like a survivor man, he looked like Clark Kent. But when he went out into the field and put his buckskin on, he was Super Larry. On the third day of the trip Larry sat all of us down and said, ‘All of you are like this chunk of obsidian, there is something good and beautiful in all of you. I invite you to find it while you walk on the trail.’”
Ezekiel was deeply touched by Larry’s words, “You can hear things in nature clearer than anywhere else. That simple teaching of Larry’s sunk deep in my heart, and eventually those words would overshadow what I had heard from old migrant workers who would say to me ‘You are a migrant worker and will die a migrant worker’.” Later that day Larry’s assistant could not continue on the trip and Larry asked Ezekiel to assist him. The next day Ezekiel joined Larry, helping with the first 480 Survival Class and subsequent classes. This was the beginning of a long collaboration, as Ezekiel would later join with Larry to start the ANASAZI Foundation.

When questioning Larry about the therapeutic nature of the first 480 Survival Class he responded, “Now as far as recognizing therapeutic processes, we did not know anything nor did we care to at the time. The experience itself is what we relied on and a mighty change would take place in a lot of cases. In fact, from what I know, all but one of those first 26 students graduated from college.”

**Private Sector Primitive Skills Wilderness Therapy Programs**

After working for nine years at BYU, Larry left the University to explore the private sector. In 1980 L. Jay Mitchell, a former student of Larry’s primitive skills class, approached him. L. Jay asked Larry if he wanted to be involved in developing the first for-profit primitive survival program for adolescents called the “School of Urban and Wilderness Survival” (SUWS) near Shoshone, Idaho. Larry explains, “I did not have any ownership of SUWS, but I did have a ten year contract with them.” Larry was hired to work on philosophy, curriculum, and train the staff. Within six years the program went from being intermittently busy to being in high demand. Larry states, “On the seventh year all of a sudden they got their advertising together and it was a turn. The kids started pouring in.” In 1987 Larry became disenchanted with SUWS as the organization became busier and greater demands were placed on Larry. He decided to leave the organization and within a year started another program.

**ANASAZI Foundation**

In 1988 Larry approached Ezekiel about starting a new primitive skills wilderness program. Ezekiel explains, “Initially I did
not want to come, as I had a good job with a benefit plan, but one night I had a dream and with all these children thanking me for helping them.” Ezekiel agreed to go in with Larry to start the ANASAZI Foundation in Arizona. “I had seven kids and Larry had 10 kids so we all worked on the program together. Sherrel (Larry’s wife) ran the first 40 day trip.”

During the early years “ANASAZI had a high success rate” according to Larry “but the office was not doing so well.” In 1990 they hired Mike Merchant to run the operations. With Mike’s help ANASAZI’s office began doing well and making profits. Yet both Larry and Ezekiel were bothered that many families could not afford ANASAZI. Larry explained, “We went out in the desert and thought about things to set the direction of the program and to help everyone we could.” After their time in the desert, Larry explained, “We wanted no financial incentive to bother us or impact the curriculum or water down the program or anything like that.” The outcome was that in 1990 the ANASAZI Foundation became the first 501 C-3 not-for-profit primitive skills based wilderness therapy program. Ezekiel said, “We are a non-profit, and we don’t have investors looking over our shoulders saying ‘Are we making any money?’ We can concentrate on the work we are doing, on the individual. The only pressure we have is to do our job well with the children. That’s why we are a non-profit. We are suppose to love the children and send them back to their families.” According to Ezekiel the program currently provides “$400,000 to $500,000 each year in scholarships.”

ANASAZI possesses an official statement and 10 guiding principles listed on its website (anasazi.org), which constitute the foundation of the ANASAZI Way. The official statement written by Ezekiel and Larry in 1990 and revised in 2003 was to help people understand how ANASAZI is different from other wilderness programs. The official statement begins with; “In 1968 the two of us pioneered the wilderness philosophy at Brigham Young University. It soon became obvious to many that a sojourn in the wilderness could impact lives for good. We received many well-intentioned offers from experts in psychology, sociology, psychiatry, juvenile justice, family counseling, education, youth leaders and other professionals to analyze and offer suggestions on how to enhance what we were doing. In an
attempt to understand and improve the process, we sifted through, by trial and error, many ideas. Whenever we adopted what we have come to call “contrived” experiences, the overall impact diminished for the participants. Ultimately, we opted in favor of the original, down-to-earth walking daily in- and with- the simple realities of nature. The program based upon good moral principle became known as The Making of a Walking” (Olsen & Sanchez, 1990).

When asked what it is that ANASAZI is trying to do to help young people and their families, Larry responded, “We are inviting people to change their heart rather than just their mind or conformity. We want them to change their heart so what they are doing is true and then they are able to do what is right rather than just faking it.”

Advocate of Non-Punitive Approach

During the late 1980’s and early 1990’s Larry reported that many for profit wilderness survival programs for adolescents, “were punitive in nature and sprung up all around us. We (ANASAZI Foundation) countered with a philosophy and ideas that talked about how you treat kids with a non-punitive approach.” Many of those punitive programs were started by people who had taken, or claimed to have taken, Larry’s primitive skills class at BYU. Larry reports that during those years their (i.e., Larry, Ezekiel, and the Anasazi Foundation) goal was to help other programs see that being punitive was not beneficial. “At that time, and during those years, I believe we were the only primitive skills therapeutic program that was non-punitive, while everyone else was escorting students and yanking them around, yelling in their faces, doing all kinds of stuff. We were the Lone Rangers out there saying, ‘No, don’t do this stuff.’” This period of time is chronicled in an article critical of wilderness therapy programs by Jon Krakauer in a 1995 Outside Magazine article titled “Loving them to Death.” Although the article is generally condemning of wilderness therapy programs, Krakauer writes that if his child were in trouble “I’d scrape up the money and put my kid in ANASAZI” (p. 142).

In 1994 Larry was called by a colleague who ran a wilderness survival program in the East regarding a collegial meeting of programs held in May at Black Mountain, North Carolina. According
to Larry, the attendees proposed they all band together to help stop abusive/punitive practices in wilderness therapy programs. This first meeting evolved into an organization called National Association of Therapeutic Wilderness Camps (NATWC) to which Larry was elected to the Board of Directors. This appears to be the first organization with the words therapeutic and wilderness in the title.

Insurance Reimbursement and State Licensure

In 1988 Larry and Ezekiel approached a number of insurance companies seeking financial reimbursement for treatment of students who attended the ANASAZI Foundation with the goal of increased financial help to families. They were told if they could meet the State requirements for adolescent residential treatment programs they could qualify for reimbursement. According to Ezekiel, “This is when we started to bring psychotherapists into the field with us.” The ANASAZI Foundation made changes to its program design to bring licensed psychotherapist to work with students. This appears to be the first time in which licensed psychotherapists were regularly brought into a wilderness program.

The involvement of licensed psychotherapists in the program helped ANASAZI to become licensed by the Arizona Department of Health Services, Office of Behavioral Health. ANASAZI was also the first wilderness program to be nationally accredited. The Joint Commission of Healthcare Organizations currently accredits ANASAZI.

Regional Influence

Of the 20 Outdoor Behavioral/Wilderness Programs with a primitive skills component listed in the 2008 NATSAP Directory, the majority were founded by people who were first trained and educated about the field in a program founded, developed, or influenced by Larry Dean Olsen (please refer to Table 1). His influence may also be reflected in that the majority of primitive skills wilderness therapy programs in the United States were started in or near the State of Utah where Larry first began developing programs in 1966 when at Brigham Young University. It could be argued that Larry either indirectly or directly influenced the majority of the primitive skills wilderness therapy programs in existence today. Larry has undoubtedly directly
or indirectly helped hundreds of thousands of adolescents and their families.

Conclusion

Larry Dean Olsen is considered one of the leaders in evolution of the field of wilderness therapy and the founder of the primitive skills model of wilderness therapy. This is evidenced in four ways. Larry’s primitive skills program at BYU appears to be the first program of its kind to help struggling young people through the use of primitive skills expeditions. Larry helped develop the SUWS program, which is the oldest of the primitive skills wilderness program, listed in the 2008 NATSAP Directory (see Table 1). Third, Larry’s vocal and persistent approach of working in a non-punitive manner with participants in wilderness therapy has become the standard of care in most programs today. Finally, ANASAZI’s dialogue with state licensing agencies and insurance regulators allowed programs to become licensed by state and national accreditation bodies and, in most states, required licensed psychotherapists to be working with students.

What is important to recognize is that Larry is cited by both critics and supporters of wilderness therapy as being a tireless advocate for treating program participants with a non-punitive approach (Adams, 1999; Krakauer, 1995; Szalavitz, 2006;). This may be reflected in the fact that the programs Larry helped start are still in existence today, are licensed by the state in which they operate in, employ licensed mental health professionals, and are well respected in the professional field. The combination of state licensure, licensed mental health professionals, and a non-punitive approach advocated by Larry is the standard of care in NATSAP member programs.

Practitioners in the field of wilderness therapy need to work closely with researchers and regulators to continue to evolve and define standards of care to end any remnants of abusive and deceptive practices. The standards must be taught to all employees of wilderness therapy programs to ensure participants safety. Larry stated that all wilderness therapy programs “should be staffed by passionate, dedicated people who have a philosophy of working with young people that is not punitive. It has got to be a cause on behalf of a child and not money.”
Programs listed as “Outdoor Behavioral or Wilderness Programs” that have a primitive skills component, in the 2008 National Association of Schools and Programs Member Directory. Listed by name, location (state), and start date. Larry Dean Olsen’s first BYU primitive skills class was in 1966.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Program</th>
<th>Location (State)</th>
<th>Start Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUWS (Co-founded by Mr. Olsen)</td>
<td>ID</td>
<td>1981</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilderness Treatment Center</td>
<td>MT</td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANASAZI (Co-founded by Mr. Olsen)</td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>1988</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilderness Quest</td>
<td>UT</td>
<td>1988</td>
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<td>Aspen Achievement Academy</td>
<td>UT</td>
<td>1989</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explorations</td>
<td>MT</td>
<td>1989</td>
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<tr>
<td>RedCliff Ascent</td>
<td>UT</td>
<td>1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage Walk, The Wilderness School</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Nature</td>
<td>UT</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alldredge (Academy) Wilderness Journey</td>
<td>WV</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<td>SUWS of the Carolinas</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>Outback Therapeutic Expeditions</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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References