

An Open Letter to Supporters of Missionary Outreach and Volunteer Evangelism (MOVE)

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We write this open letter out of deep concern and true desire for the betterment of all who are and who have been involved in the Missionary Outreach and Volunteer Evangelism (MOVE) program. We are former MOVE students and concerned family members who wish to bring into the light wrongs that have been committed. We personally experienced the events detailed in this letter or personally witnessed the devastating effects of the hardship, ridicule and abuse at the hands of MOVE administration and staff. Our purpose is to provide an accurate but non-exhaustive account of the harm perpetrated by the staff at MOVE during Generation 12 (August 2019 – November 2019).

In their recruiting efforts, representatives of MOVE failed to adequately inform potential program participants of the hardships they would likely experience. In at least a few cases, MOVE recruiters actively misrepresented what the program involved. Many of the students had never been to Belize before and were dependent on the staff for transportation, water, food, shelter, and personal safety. Students were informed that MOVE staff were volunteers and did not receive any compensation for their role in the

program. Thus, students were required to pay for transportation, drinking water, food, and medical attention. Students were provided a rough estimate of the cost involved, and were informed that some of those costs may be defrayed through donations that MOVE received to provide for needy students. It was never made clear, however, about when or how MOVE would disperse those donations and which students they deemed “worthy” to receive assistance. Frequently, staff members claimed such deprivations were an opportunity to grow closer to God or to experience His miraculous provision.

During Generation 12, students suffered from inadequate food and drinking water due to the MOVE staff’s questionable decisions and circumstances they intentionally orchestrated. Because students were left at the mercy of the staff’s actions, schedules, policies, and general disorganization and miscommunication, hunger and thirst were very real problems. At one point during the program, a student had almost no money left and sought staff advice about how to sell personal items (work boots and batteries) in order to pay for food. Overhearing the conversation, a visitor to MOVE realized this was the student whose friend had given the visitor money specifically for that purpose. This friend had been to MOVE and had seen the student struggling and had requested the money be given. The staff member, aware of the student’s need and circumstances, attributed this to a “miracle.”

Since students were responsible for their own food and supplies, they had a weekly opportunity to be driven into town to purchase these necessities. Students had limited time to accomplish their tasks and were required to meet back at the bus at an exact time. They were strictly admonished that if they were late for any reason at all they would be left to try to find their own way back to campus (whether that meant walking or catching a ride with someone from the community they were in). Students often struggled to acquire everything they needed during the time allotted.

On one occasion during Generation 12, two female MOVE students who had been tasked with going door-to-door to share the gospel missed the deadline to meet their ride. The driver, Jeff Sutton’s wife Fawna, left without them. Fawna claimed that she waited twenty minutes and tried calling the girls several times before she left. Belize is not a safe place for women to be alone, and the risk of leaving them to find their way back placed them in a potentially and needlessly dangerous situation. Nonetheless, Fawna exhibited no concern about the potential safety hazard and

did not bother to investigate whether the girls may have come to harm or experienced some difficulty that prevented them from returning at the designated time. Fawna's only concern was using this opportunity to teach the girls a lesson.

In another particularly disturbing incident, Shaw, a staff member at MOVE, was seen abusing a puppy. The puppy may have been an unwanted nuisance, but a student witnessed a deliberate action that hurt this innocent creature. While the puppy was facing away from him, Shaw took a stick and violently struck it, causing it to yelp and run away in pain and confusion. It continued to display evidence of fear and trauma minutes later. A general disregard for the wellbeing of animals prevailed on campus. Staff members instructed children and students to kick cats that got in the way. Regardless of whether these animals may be a nuisance, God's word and Spirit of Prophecy instructs us to care for all life, especially those who do not have a voice, no matter what cultural norms may dictate.

This attitude toward animals evinced an often casual disposition toward students who experienced injury. Professional medical help tended to be the last resort and at times was not offered until concerned family urgently requested it. In one instance, a student suffered what appeared to be an insect bite. In spite of the fact that infection became obvious and spread significantly through the affected limb, no medical treatment was offered until advanced sepsis had set in. Upon examination, the physician expressed the opinion that the student would have sustained irreversible harm had treatment been delayed further.

We understand that the mission field may hold many hardships, and certainly prospective missionaries need to be prepared for such hardships. Such preparation, however, should not come in the form of physical or spiritual abuse or psychological manipulation. During Generation 12, staff members hammered on students' weaknesses and perceived character defects. Staff gave "character evaluations" in which they exposed the students' "flaws" and shortcomings. While students were also encouraged to "evaluate" the staff, the power imbalance prevented students from being fully honest. The topic of fixing character defects was the subject of many worship programs, and students internalized their own failings to the extent that they did not feel it fit to criticize the staff.

The techniques used by MOVE staff are often used by manipulators. By insulting, criticizing and demeaning their victims, they chip away at self-respect, self-worth and self-esteem. Victims feel guilt and shame

about who they are, which lead them to rely on the “superior” judgement and foresight of the manipulator. Such treatment is worse when done in the name of God. As a result of such spiritual abuse, victims begin to rely on the private interpretation of a staff member to understand what God “wants” in his or her life. One Generation 12 student was so mistreated and judged by the staff, that this student questioned self-worth, relationship with God, and the calling to be a missionary. During the time at MOVE, this student’s appearance, cultural background, and personality were systematically “evaluated,” and the student was made to feel inferior and rejected. Attempts to please the staff were met with minimal encouragement. Upon returning home from the program, this student seriously questioned whether to remain a part of the church and continues to battle deep spiritual wounds and trauma. Other members from Generation 12 have similar stories.

Students were oftentimes put into artificial and contrived situations. “Survival weekend,” led by staff member Tanzi, required students to trek into the jungle and endure a series of grueling and often humiliating tasks and challenges as part of the “training.” The staff deliberately provided an inadequate supply of food and water. Dehydration became a serious issue. Students suffered real injury as a result of this artificial exercise, and one student nearly died. This student had very specific dietary requirements, and because of insufficient food and water, suffered from throat swelling, difficulty breathing and dangerously weak vital signs. Although the staff quickly took the student back to campus for emergency aid, if this had occurred at any other point during that particular day’s intense challenges, the student may not have received help in time. In addition, it is extremely important to note that Belize’s jungles are home to a staggering array of venomous snakes, spiders, frogs, and poisonous plants, all of which can inflict serious injury or death.

The Generation 12 survival weekend started on campus with a series of activities that required MOVE students to volunteer each other to compete in challenges disguised in riddles. Because the challenges were disguised in riddles, students did not know what each challenge would demand. A meager quantity of food was allotted for the weekend (the cost of which was charged to the students) in order to “motivate” the students to perform the challenges. The successful completion of each challenge involved gaining additional food and survival equipment. MOVE staff artificially intensified peer pressure by making a student’s successful completion of

a task the condition upon which other students would receive food. In addition to this physical abuse by keeping students hungry and thirsty, staff inflicted spiritual abuse by telling students they should pray for rain to provide extra drinking water.

In one challenge, another student with strict dietary requirements due to a medical condition was selected and then pressured into drinking a concoction of various disgusting items blended together by the staff. If the student failed to drink the foul mixture, additional food would have been denied the whole group. Another challenge required students to hold their backpacks above their heads for over ten minutes in order to acquire a single orange each for a Sabbath morning “treat.” If a certain number of participants dropped their backpacks below their shoulders before the time ran out, the group would have been denied the oranges. In yet another challenge, blindfolded students had to find their way to a specific area on campus and then back to the challenge area. While they were gone, a different student was tasked with holding a squat. If the student stopped squatting before the blindfolded students returned, all would have failed the challenge. As this student began to experience unbearable leg pain and cramping, others who were not participants in the challenge had to physically hold up the student.

We find it difficult to comprehend how putting students through these punishing challenges in any way prepares them for the mission field. These exercises resemble hazing much more than positive, educational missionary training. Sadly, however, students were evaluated based on their behavior and perceived character strength, and staff implied that the students’ performance reflected their “closeness” to God, fitness to be a “chosen” missionary, and the likelihood of a “successful” future.

In addition to forcing students to endure physical suffering and deprivation, MOVE “training” emphasized academic assignments over actually connecting with people from the villages and working on relationships with them. Very little to no encouragement came from the staff after students gave sermons or Bible studies in the village. Most feedback was negative regarding what was done wrong or what could have been done better. Very little was said about how to build loving friendships or trusting relationships with the villagers.

Based on our experience, as recounted in this letter, MOVE has some very questionable policies regarding their treatment of students who come for missionary training. Neither the website nor actual conversations with

staff members accurately described the philosophy, rigorous curriculum, or actual daily life at MOVE. Students' completion of the initial three month program in Belize was dependent upon fulfilling the capricious expectations of the staff, which was susceptible to their personal opinions of a students' perceived value as potential missionaries and the students' fulfillment of whatever arbitrary tasks the staff required of them. Additionally, if students completed all the requirements but desired to serve as a missionary in a specific location that was not deemed appropriate by the staff (i.e. United States, Canada, a student's home country, etc.), they were given more requirements to fulfill, as serving in those areas was looked down upon.

We could write many more stories and provide far more examples of the staff's abuse of power during the Generation 12 "training." We could write about a great deal more pain that students suffered. We share only these few stories to raise awareness, fuel change, and promote healing. Abuse prevails when victims remain silent. We hold all of the staff at MOVE accountable, but particularly Jeff Sutton and Keila Valenzuela, both of whom are in positions of leadership at MOVE, have willingly turned their eyes from injustice and have perpetrated harm on their students, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

While MOVE may have started out as a worthy endeavor with honorable intentions, in its current state it falls short of its high calling and misrepresents not only our beloved Seventh-day Adventist Church, but also the character of Jesus. Every human is a child of God and should be treated with kindness and respect. Training missionaries should be done in a loving, Christ-centered environment. We pray this open letter brings to light that changes need to be made in the treatment and education of the students who attend MOVE. We hope that any readers with the authority and ability to effect change will do so.

Signed,
Former MOVE students and concerned family