

Mrs. Reagan: 'Nothing As Painful' As Seeing Youngsters' Drug Abuse

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (UPI) — Nancy Reagan's voice choked with emotion as she told teenage drug abusers and their mothers and fathers that there is "nothing as painful for a parent" as to see their child hurt by drug abuse.

Mrs. Reagan, on a two-state tour of drug programs, spoke after an emotional, confession-filled session at Straight Inc., a controversial effort that tries to wean teenagers off drugs through behavior modification.

Today she was to fly to Texas to visit Texans' War Against Drugs, an anti-drug committee, and meet Richardson Families in Action, a suburban Dallas parents group.

Monday night, teenage after teenage stood up in a huge auditorium to tell Mrs. Reagan of their experiences with drugs ranging from cocaine to insecticide. She listened for several hours to the children and their parents describe what drugs did to their lives. Several broke down as they spoke.

Mrs. Reagan, wearing a black

Chanel-style suit and red blouse, stood up and spoke to the 1,000 people in the sign-decorated, flag-bedecked auditorium.

"I'm so proud of you and I love you, too," the first lady told the teenagers, who were mainly white and clean-cut and who described themselves as "druggies."

Turning to their parents, the first lady said, "Being a parent myself, I know how painful it must be for you ..." Her voice caught and she paused. "There's nothing as awful for a parent, nothing as painful for a parent, as to have something happen to their child," she said.

The crowd applauded her loudly and a teenage boy and girl presented her with a valentine. She hugged and kissed them.

"We feel like you are not only the first mother of the land, but also a member of our family," Miller Newton, Straight's executive director, told her.

The Straight program, a privately

funded effort patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous, enrolls teenagers for an average of eight months. For their first several weeks they spend 12 hours a day at the center, and are given more time off as they make more progress.

In January, the American Civil Liberties Union filed suit against Straight's Georgia branch, saying five teenagers were being held there against their will. The ACLU is now trying to work out an out-of-court settlement under which an independent panel would monitor complaints about the program.

Some critics say the program uses brainwashing techniques to indoctrinate teenagers, but Carlton Turner, White House drug policy adviser, said a Canadian expert recently studied the program and cleared it of such charges.

The Straight meeting began with patriotic song singing and a question-and-answer session between the teenagers and Mrs. Reagan.