

# Former Drug User, 18, Praises Treatment Plan

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Her voice almost breaking, the attractive, smartly dressed 18-year-old told of taking TCP, marijuana, cocaine, speed and anything else she could get. There were times, she said, when she almost wished she were dead.

Today, those unhappy days are far behind her, and Jessica [redacted] is an enthusiastic advocate of the STRAIGHT program which she credits with helping her back to



JESSICA [redacted]  
'Everything's Changed'

full mental, physical and spiritual health.

"Part of it was just finding out that there were other people who cared, who understood what I'd been through," she said. "Before, I felt as though I was trapped inside a bubble and couldn't reach out to anyone. I thought the drugs would help me, but they didn't — they made everything worse."

Miss [redacted] was speaking to members of the East Cobb Welcome Wagon Club. Listeners literally wiped tears from their eyes as the young girl described her deteriorating family relationships before STRAIGHT.

"I rejected my mom and dad," she said. "I pushed them away emotionally, and I tried to run away from home, although they only wanted to help me."

After completing the first phase of the program in St. Petersburg, Miss [redacted] was allowed to resume seeing her family again. This time, all was completely different.

"I saw my dad standing there and I ran to him, and he lifted me up," she said. "I was his girl again, like I used to be before the drugs. And now my mom is my best friend, too. Everything's changed."

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She was referred to the program after an arrest at the age of 16 had alerted her father to the full extent of her problem. Disgusted with herself and seeing the need for change, she agreed and was placed in the first phase of the treatment program.

"That's when you're on belt-loops," she explained. "Someone holds you by the belt-loops all the while. It's not so much to restrain you as to show that people are with you. They care about you."

Occasionally during the first phase a teenager might try to harm others by, for example, biting or hitting to get free. In these cases, other members of the program or staff would prevent them from doing so, but at no time was physical punishment used, she said.

This point was reiterated by Cobb school board member Carolyn Duncan, who said as a responsible parent with a son who has graduated from STRAIGHT, she resented any implication she would allow harm to come to him on the program.

"If a minor wants to leave the program, there are procedures they can follow, but generally the parents wish them to be kept there for the child's own good," she told the group, "but there was never any physical abuse."

After the age of 18, participants can discharge themselves if they really wish to, but most don't, she added.

Phase two of the program encourages the teenagers to work on their family relationships. At this stage they may live at home or with foster parents. On phase three, the participants either return to school or get a job.

Phase four sees them gradually making friends with people outside STRAIGHT and weaning themselves from the program, while in phase five they begin to give back to the group the concern and care they received from it by taking part in discussions and becoming part of the "chain of command" in which recent entrants make their wishes known to those on the staff.

Currently Miss [REDACTED], a Kennesaw

College student, is on the junior staff at the local STRAIGHT program on Austell Road. She said she enjoys helping others who are going through the same process, she did. She may, she said, become a psychologist one day, although she hasn't yet decided on a career. Her future will be free of drugs, she said.

"I'll have ginger ale at my wedding!" she said. "I don't even want to take one sip of alcohol. That's how my drug problem began, by drinking when I was 12."

Mrs. Duncan described how her son, [REDACTED], now a Walton High School senior, gradually became dependent on drugs.

"We knew our family was growing apart, and [REDACTED] never wanted to take part in anything with us, the way he used to," she said, "but we didn't know what to look for. Then one day he confessed to having taken pot and alcohol, and we thought, well, that was pretty bad, but maybe that was all, and it would stop."

It didn't. [REDACTED] had also been using speed, cocaine, other drugs and growing marijuana plants in the Duncans' back yard, his mother said. Eventually, 70 plants were discovered, which a "friend" had been showing him how to process.

At that point, the Duncans heard about STRAIGHT and decided to send their son there. They were delighted with the results.

"[REDACTED] is back home with us, he's part of the family again, our relationships are good, and we're really happy with the way things turned out," she said. "After the program, [REDACTED] has grown emotional" and spiritually."

Allegations against the STRAIGHT program were not founded on fact but on hearsay evidence from some teenagers who decided to quit the course and who gave the public incorrect information, said Mrs. Duncan.

"They seem to have a sort of vendetta against STRAIGHT," she said. "The people about whom they asked for habeas corpus writs to be issued have all said they don't want to leave the program anyway."