



DIANNE LAAKSO / Staff

Saying grace are Ron and Linda [redacted] (left); their son, Jeff (foreground); and Steve [redacted]. The boys are in Straight Inc.'s treatment program for troubled youth.

DIRE STRAIGHT INC.?

Critics say tax-exempt youth facility 'rehabilitates' troubled teens by bullying and brainwashing them

By Diane Loupe
STAFF WRITER

Expensive treatment facilities and psychiatrists had drained their savings and their insurance benefits as easily as their teenager drained a six-pack. After years of fighting it, Stokes and Beverly [redacted] still had a son who got drunk, stoned and violent.

Broke and desperate, the North Carolina couple turned to Straight Inc., and they found a savior.

"We watched as they loaded our child onto a helicopter to take him to a trauma center," Mr. [redacted] said. "Now we watch our child walk out of a high school where he's making A's and B's."

His wife adds, "It's been a miracle for our family."

Ron and Linda [redacted] of Marietta took their son, Jeff, to Straight after his drinking had brought him two brushes with the law.

"Our child can now smile and talk about

God and feelings and not yell threats," Mrs. [redacted] said, smiling. "This is the best thing that's ever happened to us."

But other families in similar desperation said the price their children paid to find sobriety at Straight was too high.

Bush, Reagans among supporters

Critics say the youth rehabilitation group — which counts President Bush and former President Reagan and Nancy Reagan among its powerful supporters — places almost Draconian physical demands and Nazi-like mind control on the teenage offenders, some of whom are under 18 or under court order and can't elect to leave.

In the end, some parents said, untrained supervisors and other clients emotionally battered their children into submission, often ignoring their pleas for medical help and water, dictating when they could go to the bathroom,

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Straight: Cited in Ga. probe

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abandoning sometimes brutal physical restraints, and preventing them from reading secular materials, watching television or making telephone calls to friends and family.

A recent investigation by the Georgia Department of Human Resources Office of Regulatory Affairs cited the program for:

▶ Hiring unqualified staff members.

▶ Ignoring client complaints about being denied water, sleep, and medical attention.

▶ Violating state and federal laws on dispensing medications.

▶ Not evaluating and documenting a policy that allows clients to restrain other clients.

C. Suzanne Hardman-Broder, administrator of the Straight facility in Marietta, denied all accusations and said Straight doesn't abuse kids. The program's rules are strict, she said, but that's why it works.

In a "therapeutic community," clients and parents set the rules and help supervise other clients to restrict their access to drugs or alcohol and to prevent them from harming themselves or others. Those rules relax as adolescents proceed to the program's fifth phase, when clients take a role in counseling less-advanced clients.

Furthermore, the program's fee of about \$14,000 for one to two years of treatment offers an affordable alternative to the \$20,000 to \$30,000 per month fees of inpatient substance abuse programs.

Parents must raise money

But critics point out that Straight costs less because clients rarely have contact with psychiatrists or counselors with advanced degrees. And the program demands that parents raise hundreds of dollars a month and either operate group homes or pay other parents who do.

The national Straight, a tax-exempt non-profit organization, raised \$2.8 million in donations and \$11.6 million in fees from parents and insurance in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, 1990.

Marty Rotter, director of the state office that investigated the program, said Straight has submitted a plan to correct the problems and the program's license is not in jeopardy. In spite of the allegations, his office doesn't plan



MARLENE KARAS / Staff

Among those critical of Straight Inc. are Kathy [redacted] and her daughter, Christine, 16, of Marietta.

to interview any current Straight clients.

The St. Petersburg, Fla.-based program closed four facilities in California, Texas, Virginia and Maryland following state investigations of complaints and loss or threatened revocation of operating licenses. Straight blames a bad economy for the closings.

The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations downgraded the Cobb County facility to conditional accreditation, the lowest status of an accredited group, and revoked the accreditation of a Boston-area facility.

'Fascist dictatorship'

Stanton Peele, a New Jersey addiction research expert, called Straight a "fascist dictatorship" with a long history of problems. "They've got all the strong points and bad points of totalitarian groups," Dr. Peele said.

"The idea that young children who may or may not be serious substance abusers can react positively to being harassed in minor ways, being deprived of street clothes, access to things they like, and the major ways in which people denigrate them in a totalitarian environment, the idea that people can be helped by that is contrary to everything we know about what benefits people psychologically," Dr. Peele said.

Christine [redacted] of Marietta, a 16-year-old who spent about two years in the Straight program before withdrawing last summer,

said she was often denied sleep and water in the program. Other clients often physically restrained her, once pressing upon a bandaged wound to subdue her, she claimed.

Ashley [redacted], a former Straight client and counselor, said the program often prevented clients over age 18 from leaving.

"Admissions workers were often urged to admit every potential client that walked in the door, regardless of substance abuse history," Mr. [redacted] said.

Disgruntled employee cited

Ms. Margolis and Ms. Hardman-Broder dismiss critics as disgruntled or dysfunctional parents and claim that all complaints come from a zealous, disgruntled former employee whose group is backed by two foundations that favor drug legalization and oppose drug treatment. But one of those organizations, Drug Policy Foundation, supports drug treatment and also has prestigious backers such as Carl Sagan and Baltimore Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke.

President Bush, who named two Florida Straight volunteers as his 656th daily "Point of Light" on Jan. 1, remains a staunch supporter, despite the criticism. Two wealthy supporters of Mr. Bush's campaign, Florida businessmen Melvin Sembler and Joseph Zappala, are founders of the Straight program.

Christine [redacted] parents, Kathy and Don, say Straight helped her stop abusing alcohol and prescription drugs. But they think Straight exploited their family economically.

For nearly two years, the [redacted]s paid Straight about \$500 a month and operated a so-called host home, boarding up to six teenagers, adding \$600 to monthly grocery and utility bills. In addition, the parents raised about \$300 every month by selling candy and poinsettias and standing on street corners on weekends collecting donations for Straight, often in the rain.

"You're brainwashed and scared to question it," Mrs. [redacted] said. Mr. [redacted] added, "We were told that if you didn't like it, your kid would be dead in a couple of days."

"Well, it's been six months and she's not dead yet," Mrs. [redacted] said.

Straight's track record

Dallas, Texas

Closed in October 1991, by Straight, citing financial reasons, after state authorities moved to revoke the center's license after validating complaints about abuse.

Washington, D.C.-area

Springfield, Va., Straight voluntarily closed in July 1991, after a battle with Virginia officials, who cited the center for violations including allowing clients to restrain other clients, depriving clients of education during initial treatment stages, strip-searching clients in front of peers and allowing a client to remain in the program after he had been accused of sexually abusing other clients.

Hampton Roads, Chesapeake, Va.

Straight officials said they closed the facility because the Persian Gulf War reduced the population base.

Plymouth, Mich.

State regulators plan to inspect the facility weekly, after finding the program had twice inappropriately restrained

clients, injuring one. Michigan has ordered the program to get a residential license, entailing more stringent inspection of host-home arrangements.

Yorba Linda, Calif.

Voluntarily closed in 1990 after state officials refused program a license, raising concerns of abuse.

Stoughton, Mass.

State license is under review; the program agreed to drop the host home component of the facility. Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations revoked accreditation; Straight is appealing.

Orlando, Fla.

Complaints over the years about abuse include clients injured while being restrained by other clients, crowding in host homes and deprivation of food and bathroom privileges. Regulators are reviewing the program, which is on a provisional license, but a state official said the program appears to be improving.

Tampa Bay/St. Petersburg, Fla.

Fewer problems have arisen in the past two years and Straight is in good standing with regulators.