

TOUGH-LOVE METHOD

'Straight gave me back my family'

■ First Step / 1B

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SMYRNA — Fifteen-year-old Pete [redacted] was out of control. Drinking, using drugs, disappearing for weeks at a time and running with wrong crowd. He was living life in the fast lane.

His parents, no longer able to handle the youngster and fearful that he would die of a drug or alcohol overdose, committed him to Straight Inc. in May 1990.

A controversial drug-treatment program for adolescents, the Florida-based Straight's unorthodox and so-called tough-love methods at its Smyrna center became the target of a state investigation last year, after several complaints were filed that program officials

physically and emotionally abused adolescents. State officials said that none of those complaints could be substantiated.

Straight centers in Texas and Virginia, however, were ordered closed last year after similar complaints were made about unorthodox treatment practices.

Pete [redacted] says that Straight saved his life. Now, nearly two years later, he is traveling at a slower pace.

"I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict at the same time," said Pete, now 17. "I just take it one day at a time."

Learning to cope with his problems and admit his illnesses took time, he said. And lots of support. He said that he got all that and more from Straight.

"Straight gave me back my family," said Pete's father, Pete [redacted], of Kennesaw.

Before sending his son to Straight, [redacted] a

See STRAIGHT, Page 8A

Straight

Continued from Page 1A

licensed auto dealer, said he called several treatment centers, all of which wanted to know where he worked and whether he was insured. "When I called Straight, all they wanted to know was when they could speak to me and my son," he said.

The drug-treatment program — which has six centers nationwide, including one at 2221 Austell Road in Smyrna, where Pete received treatment — seems to be effective for some youths. But its critics say that Straight's methods borders on physical and emotional abuse.

Straight is a five-part program that can take up to two years to complete. Drug-abusing youths are taken from their homes, placed in host homes and have it drilled into them by Straight counselors that drugs and alcohol kill.

For some youths, this indoctrination works. For others, it only worsens their emotional problems.

"A lot of Straight's philosophies run counter to what we know is best when dealing with adolescents," said Dr. Guy Sommers, an adolescent medicine specialist who treats teen drug and alcohol addicts at Ridgeview Institute in Smyrna. "I don't understand how Straight could work."

He characterized Straight's methods as "militant and controlling." Teens respond to love, he said.

Straight Administrator C. Suzanne Hardman-Broder said that the program's hard-nosed, anti-drug agenda is designed to mature teen drug-users.

"That's what we do here," she said. "We grow

them up."

On the average, about 70 adolescents are enrolled in the program at any given time.

Based on the 12 recovery steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Straight removes its teen patients from school until the third part of the program, which generally takes about four to six months of treatment to reach.

This is a direct contradiction to the medical approach to drug treatment, Dr. Sommers said, in which patients are required to attend classes.

Other drug-treatment programs, such as those at Ridgeview and Brawner Psychiatric Hospital in Smyrna, have high school classes on site. Both programs are run by doctors, and treatment can cost \$20,000 to \$30,000 a month for hospitalized patients.

Straight supporters, many unable to afford that cost, contend that the \$13,900 program, for one or two years of treatment, offers an affordable alternative.

"We couldn't have afforded to take our son to [Brawner or Ridgeview]," said Linda [redacted] of Marietta. Joshua [redacted] went through the Straight program in 1990. "What was the option — let them die or go to jail?"

Joshua, now 19, is a sophomore business-management student at Kennesaw State College in north Cobb. He is an "A" student, his mother added.

Parents whose children have benefited from Straight argue that if something works, don't question it. Many parents, like Mrs. [redacted], say they were desperate and Straight offered them a workable and affordable solution.

"It hurts me that the slant [towards Straight] is so negative," Mrs. [redacted] said. "[Joshua is] a testimonial that Straight works."