

Local Youth Goes Straight — Spends Year In Rehab Program

By MELINDA GHOLSON

Of The Leader-Call Staff

Using the shock tactic as an attention-getter, Derek █ had his audience captivated immediately. "I've done cocaine, quaaludes, hash, hash oil, LSD, narcotics, pot, mushrooms," the conservative-looking young man in the peach, button-down Polo shirt said.

Parents sat up in their cushion-seat, hard-back chairs — listening intently to the spurts of hurried, strained testimony coming from behind the podium on the Watkins High School stage. They had come to hear this young, curly-haired, handsome man speak about the trauma he had endured during his bout with drug abuse.

They had come to hear a heroic, personal story about a young man who had spent many an evening drunk, stoned, high, plastered, bombed. They had come to hear a prodigal son returning home preach about the evils of his worldly ways. And the parents, teenagers and children who gathered at the meeting sponsored by Parents for Drug Free Youth got what they came for — a real life drama as told by the leading character.

"Coming to high school a lot of mornings I'd really be high. I'd stand right out here in the smoking quarters and b.s. with my friends about what a good time I'd had that weekend," Derek told his audience. "But it really wasn't fun anymore. It was just dull."

Derek told the group about practicing with the high school tennis team when he was stoned. He told about being arrested for possession of marijuana his senior year. He told about stealing jewelry from his mother to buy drugs — about forging checks, about stealing money from his father's wallet.

"I remember thinking of myself as scum, as no good," he said. "I remember being scared and thinking — God, am I going to be screwed up like this for years?"

"It hurts a lot to look back on all that. I hated myself as a person."

After a year at the Straight, Inc., drug rehabilitation center in Atlanta, Ga., Derek says he has turned his back on his former life in Laurel and the friends he calls "druggies."

"I didn't really have any close friends when I was on dope. I was with them 95 percent of the time but we weren't close. We didn't know each other — we were killing each other," Derek said in an interview following his talk.

His words came easier — and with even more intensity — after he had escaped from the crowds; after he finished hugging a dozen or so sun-tanned teenage girls in the audience; after the sounds of "we're proud of you" from serious looking adults could no longer reach him.

"I know that doing drugs is a cop out. It's an easy way to feel good quick. . . I had a lot of mottos in my past. One of them was: 'live fast and die young' — and I was sure headed there fast."

Now, Derek says, he has put that attitude behind him. He has gotten rid of feelings of inferiority and the need to impress people. He has learned

to be honest with other people — and with himself.

"I had to break through a lot of built up feelings — broken dreams," Derek says of his recovery. "The hardest thing was admitting that I was wrong."

Derek says he now has "his own personality."

"In my past, I wasn't happy with me. I didn't like me. I would watch TV and pick up lines from Burt Reynolds or Clint Eastwood," he says. "Now, I pretty much am myself."

According to the Straight program, Derek should not date for five more months because, at this point, it would be a way for him to rely on girls to provide him with a feeling of security. It is also wise, Derek believes, to stay away from Laurel and his old friends in order to avoid temptation.

He plans to spend the next few months in Atlanta as a counselor at Straight. Eventually, he would like to return to the University of Mississippi and finish school majoring in business administration.

Although Derek says he has "totally violated every moral" he now relies on the most strict moral code — no drugs, no alcohol, no cigarettes, no premarital sex. And he relies on the Bible as a "booklet on how to live and be happy."

"God is there and I know it," Derek says. "I read the Bible every single day, regardless. It's not because I have to. I think the Bible helps me establish what to do."

Straight does not base its recovery program on any particular religion. Katharine Holding, program coordinator for Straight in Atlanta, says however, that the Straight program is a spiritual program — "spiritual meaning that it's a program based for the kids to find a belief in a god as they understand it."

"We're not here to define what that god is," she says, "but we feel that it's very important to find a belief in something higher than yourself — and we choose to call that God."

She believes, as does Derek, that a person may overcome drug addiction without a deep commitment to a higher being. "Personally, I'm not saying someone can't get straight without it (spirituality) but I don't think they would have as serene a sobriety as someone who does believe (in a higher being)," she says.

The Straight program is focused on series of rap sessions which involve the entire family. Those clients — ranging in age from 12 to 21 — who enroll in Straight, begin the program by living in a foster home with a family which has a child in a more advanced level of the program. Straight participants come to Straight headquarters in the Marietta area of Atlanta every day of the week — from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and from 2 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Sunday.

About 200 individuals and their families are involved in the Atlanta area Straight program.

"Straight is based on peer counseling," Ms. Holding says. "We have a large staff of

kids who have evolved out of Straight and have been straight for some time. They guide the raps. It's kids helping kids. . . Families are required to come in for mandatory raps."

Ms. Holding says that many of the clients enrolled in Straight talk about feelings of inferiority, as Derek did in his Monday evening talk to Parents for Drug Free Youth. "A low self image is a common thing," she says.

Drug dependency is a complex illness though, she says. And she cautions that the problem should not be blamed on any one thing. "To try to find any one reason of why someone turned to drugs . . . is just not that simple."

She says that the Straight treatment is not complex. The goal is to get drug abusers to focus on themselves and to stop blaming institutions, schools, family members or friends for their problems.

"The bottom line is accepting responsibility for yourself here and now today, rather

than blaming somebody else," she says.

Speaking to a group of people — especially a group that includes peers — is extremely hard for rehabilitated drug users, Ms. Holding says. Ms. Holding says talks like the one Derek presented are strictly voluntary — "no one has to unless they want to."

Most Straight clients are willing to talk about their experiences though, she says. "Usually, when they have had a really low self image and all of a sudden they've found a new way of liking themselves, they want to share that — because they're proud — and they're also humbled at the same time. And they're really grateful."

And Derek confirmed Ms. Holding's statements as he spoke to the Laurel Parents for Drug Free Youth: "I've changed totally from the person I was . . . I know that I'm an important person now . . . I feel ashamed for what I've done, but I feel proud for what I'm doing now."