

Helping kids get Straight

By Lisa Cardillo Rose
Post Staff Reporter

GREG ██████, clean-cut and poised, has been to hell and back again.

Like many adolescents, the Indian Hill High School student yielded to youthful insecurity a few years ago. A bright and athletic boy, he recalls that he got a "message" at school—"Being straight wasn't cool. Kids who were straight were losers."

██████ says he started using drugs in sixth grade out of curiosity, then for status among friends. He gradually allowed his life to be swallowed by the chemicals he abused. He was fired from a job, expelled from school, arrested for purse-snatching.

Then he found Straight Inc., a drug rehabilitation program in St. Petersburg, Fla. He says it set him free.

"I was like a teenage alcoholic before I came to Straight," said ██████ now 18 and a senior. "I thank God I was one of millions of

Similar program starts at Hebron, Ky.;
Parents involved in enrollment process.
Page 8A

druggie kids who was picked to be in Straight. I just feel great about myself."

Straight is described as a kind of salvation for drug-abusing teenagers by supporters of the program, who expect to introduce it to Cincinnati in late-December. A similar program, Kids Helping Kids, operates in Hebron, Ky.

But some critics say Straight relies on heavy-handed tactics to achieve its goals. One former client calls it "a prison and mental brainwashing—as bad as they can treat you."

A DRUG-FREE program, Straight bases its therapy on the premise that peer pressure lured teenagers into the drug culture and it can be used to turn them away from it.

The youths are placed in foster homes during the program's first "phase." They come to the Straight center seven days a week for 12 hours daily. School or work activities are excluded.

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The clients, as youths enrolled in the program are called, gradually return to their schools and jobs. They receive a few days off from Straight each week as they progress.

They spend much of their time at Straight discussions aimed at getting them to look honestly at their problems. Many staff members are former "druggies" who have been through similar experiences.

When they leave the center at night, the youths write self-reflective discourses about the things they have learned about themselves during the day.

"IT'S reverse peer pressure and it works," [redacted] said. "Instead of a bunch of druggies telling you to get high, it is a bunch of straight people telling you to get straight."

Kevin [redacted], a former Mt. Carmel, Ohio, resident now living in Largo, Fla., admits that Straight has been successful in keeping some youths away from drugs. But Wolfe says he wouldn't send "my worst enemy or dog there."

A former Forest Hills student, [redacted] says he felt pressured at Straight by what he

Straight Continued from Page 1A

considers unreasonable restrictions and the staff's seemingly negative attitude toward the clients. He ran away from Straight twice, in 1979 and again in 1980.

describes a regimented, rigidly controlled program. At first, youths are led around by their belt loops, a practice also followed in the Kids Helping Kids program in Hebron.

During the first phase of the program, Wolfe said, he stayed in a foster home with bars on the windows. He couldn't wear shoes in the home, apparently so he couldn't run away.

A person who doesn't conform, said, is likely to get a hostile reaction from other clients and counselors.

"YOU ARE guarded constantly at every door, every window. It seems like a prison," said. "Mentally and physically, people are coming down on you. Everybody there is against you. You can't trust anybody."

Because the teenagers are encouraged to give accounts of their past errors, said, some clients would try to "con" their way out. Some youths "would say stuff they didn't do to make it sound nice. Get out quicker," he said.

Greg however, says Straight works because young people can't fool counselors who have used drugs themselves.

"I was an easy con," said of his pre-Straight days. "I conned everybody. Everybody thought I was a really nice kid. I dressed real preppy. I had short hair. People thought I was straight."

When his attitude at home soured, Purcell's parents took him to several psychologists and psychiatrists. He would complain that his parents nagged him. The physicians would relay that message to the family.

"Drugs," said "never were in the view." Because so few parents know about drug abuse, he said, that situation is common.

"LIKE MOST parents, mine didn't want to realize I was a druggie," said Purcell. "Right away, my mom especially, thought 'Oh, I'm a failure,' which is a reaction that almost every mother and every father has. It's not their fault because it was my decision to do drugs to begin with."

says the strict discipline used at Straight is necessary. With that approach, a drug-abusing youth is forced to face up to his or her problem, he said.

"You've got to be tough to a druggie," Purcell explained. "A druggie has no idea at all of reality. The strong atmosphere helps the person to become honest."

That attitude is shared by James Hartz, Straight's executive director.

"We're a structured program," he said. "We don't believe you get kids straight by



Photographer: BRUCE CHEFFIN

Greg says Straight set him free:

letting them do their own thing."

Of complaints about the program, Hartz said: "You're not going to make everyone happy all of the time."

However, Hartz noted that Straight has been praised by several national authorities on drug abuse, including Dr. Robert Dupont, founding director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

AT STRAIGHT'S request, Dr. Andrew Malcolm, author of several books on drug dependency, examined the program this year to evaluate charges that it favored brainwashing techniques or encouraged a cult-like existence.

In his largely favorable report, Malcolm said of Straight: "The program is strict but it is eminently humane and fair, and this combination is one of the reasons for its success. No one is injured by the orderliness of Straight."

Straight's Hartz said 55 percent of those who enroll in the program complete it. Of that number, half stay off of drugs for at least one year. Twenty-five percent have a minor relapse and return for additional treatment, he said.

Because of its controversial approach, Straight has been the occasional subject of lawsuits and newspaper headlines since it opened in Florida.

In 1977, several employees resigned, citing objections to Straight's administration.

St. Petersburg attorney Roger Meas said while a court order was being delivered to release the son of one of his clients from the program, Straight employees tried to slip

the teenager out the back door and into a van.

STRAIGHT has been a subject of controversy as recently as this past spring, after the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services interviewed five clients in a monitoring visit to Straight in March.

The department's report criticized some aspects of Straight's client treatment and record-keeping.

Some of the young clients reported Straight employees threatened them with court orders or commitment to a mental institution if they did not voluntarily sign up for the program.

"This appears to be a questionable clinical practice that should be carefully reviewed by program administration," the department's report said.

Straight's program in St. Petersburg started about five years ago, and there now are branches in Sarasota and Atlanta.

Thirty-five to 40 Greater Cincinnati youths are now in the St. Petersburg program, Hartz said. The families of the first local youths who went into the Florida program spread the word about it here.

The interim director of the Cincinnati center will be a man with a master's degree in psychology and experience at Straight's Atlanta branch, Hartz said.

Eight peer counselors will be working at the center. Two adults—a college freshman and a college senior with Straight experience—also will be on the staff. Hartz said the Florida program has a part-time doctor and a part-time psychiatrist, as the Cincinnati program also will have.

LOCAL organizers are trying to raise \$650,000 to renovate a building near Milford for the Straight center and for operating costs, said Thomas Markham, co-chairman of the drive to bring the program here. The drive has attracted financial support from firms like Procter & Gamble, American Financial Corp. and Kroger, he said.

In addition to Straight and Kids Helping Kids, two hospital-based adolescent treatment programs will be introduced in this area in the coming months.

The Care Unit Hospital of Cincinnati is expected to open in May 1982 at the present site of St. George Hospital, where it will serve 24 adolescents with drug and alcohol abuse problems, said Conrad Foss of the St. Francis Hospital Care Unit.

Mark Davis, director of the Bethesda Alcohol and Drug Treatment Program, said a 60-bed unit planned for the grounds of Bethesda North Hospital will have room for 30 drug-abusing adolescents. The target date for starting that program is mid-1983.

"There is certainly a need for a variety of programs," said Foss, "and hopefully folks can identify what individual youths need when people are presenting themselves for treatment."