

Parent-child meetings bare family's agony

Fourth of five articles

By Nancy Berlier

Post-Staff Reporter

MT. REPOSE, Ohio — Upbeat songs echo in the hallways of Straight Inc. each Monday and Friday night, as parents wait outside the closed doors of the drug rehabilitation center's meeting room.

Some parents complain about being tired after rushing home from work to grab a quick dinner—if they had that much time—before driving 30 or 45 minutes to Mt. Repose. Finding supportive new friends there, parents exchange hurried stories about their children's progress, or lack of it.

Parents faithfully attend each open meeting, even after they are shocked—as they stand before nearly 500 other parents and youths—to hear, sometimes for the first time, that drugs led their child to become a prostitute, have a homosexual relationship or promiscuous sex.

INSIDE THE meeting room, chairs have been arranged so 174 youths in the program face the empty chairs their families will fill. Junior staff members call out the names of youngsters who will talk to their parents, get responsibilities for the next week, be promoted to a higher phase or return home for the first time since entering the program. The announcements have an uplifting effect on the youths, who, in unison, loudly call out the name of each youngster who has earned a privilege.

When the doors open at 6:30 p.m. for parents to enter, the youths belt out what has become their theme, "I Am Straight," sung to the tune of "I Am Woman."

Opening the session, the director asks that "what you see and hear remains here." Two junior staff members sit on tall stools between the youths and

The Straight story

parents.

The "rap" leaders call for newcomers to introduce themselves. Each introduction follows the same format:

"My name is ... I am ... years old. The drugs I've taken are ... I've been in the program for ... days. I am a druggie."

Then, each youth mentions something about his or her past, present and future.

While some youths matter-of-factly confess secrets of their drug-ridden lifestyles, others become tearful. In between newcomers, those who have been in the program longer face the crowd and talk about changes in their lives.

Then the parents tell the group what life with a "druggie" was like.

"WE THOUGHT, 'He's just experimenting, it's the normal adolescent thing to do,'" says a mother as her husband nervously shuffles his feet, clasped and unclasped his hands.

The family became strained and abnormal, the father says. "I'm frustrated. I'm angry with my son. I'm irritated with my wife. I'm starting to wonder what was happening between us," he says.

The father says he had doubts about putting his son in such a rigid program, even after the son was there.

When the son ran away, he says, "I felt maybe it's my fault. Maybe I should be more committed."

THEY BARE THEIR souls because each parent in the room had similar problems dealing with drug-dependent children. When the couple sit down, the



Photographer PATRICK REDDY

Youths at Straight drug treatment center support each other following a meeting.

applause is loud and sustained.

What follows is a series of heartbreaking conversations across the crowded room.

A couple stands, either the husband or wife gripping a microphone, and their child stands facing them. The parents speak. The only response permitted children is, "Love you, Mom. Love you, Dad."

At times, the discourse is joyful enough to elicit applause and critical enough to leave a child crying in his chair as the microphone is passed on.

"I FEEL GOOD about you being here," a mother says to her son, "because there's one thing I don't need around the house anymore and that's a liar and a thief."

A father tells his son: "You've got to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." He says says the son can return home drug-free, or not at all.

Two mothers are disappointed that their children have disobeyed the program rules

and resisted change. One says she is "really hurt and disappointed and scared because you're sitting over there frozen on day 20 (of the program)." The other says, "I'm not going to say 'I love you' because you're acting like this after all you've been through."

QUIETLY AND tearfully, the children tell their mothers they love them—and sit down.

When children shout "Talk" or "Fourth phase" as their parents stand to speak, the audience erupts with deafening applause.

Parents don't know if their children have earned privileges or promotions until they are told in the open meeting. Broad smiles cross the faces of parents as they take the microphone to offer congratulations.

The most touching moment comes when a child shouts, "Coming home," and dashes across the room to hug his parents, from whom he or she has been separated since entering

Straight.

When a youngster earns the right to live at home again, he continues in the program, and his parents' house becomes a foster home for youngsters in lower phases of the program.

At the end of the meeting, parents join hands and recite the Lord's Prayer.

THEN, MOST of the parents form lines in the back of the room, waiting for the doors to be opened. Parents whose children have earned "talk" privileges wait for the children to be brought to them.

This is a time for children to talk and parents to listen. Sons and daughters make amends, confess troubling guilt about lies and problems and and apologize.

As those parents listening to their children, the doors open for the rest of the parents to leave. As they walk out, the children remaining in the group sing, "I'm on My Way."

Next: Not for everyone.