

Teens In Program Learn New Values 'The Hard Way'

SUE MacDONALD
Staff Reporter

program in Clermont County,
deals with every day.

When Mike [redacted] found out his parents wanted him to enter the Straight Inc. drug rehabilitation program, the Anderson Township youth envisioned padded cells, shock treatment and brainwashing.

"When I hear that now, I don't feel angry but I feel eager to tell people it's not like that at all," said [redacted], 21, now working as a plumber's apprentice and glad to be free of his drug habit.

"I was more brainwashed when I was on drugs than when I was in Straight. It's not brainwashing here. It's people helping people. They have the tools here to help people, and it's up to the individual to change."

[redacted] is one of a number of Cincinnati-area teens who have completed the Straight program and learned how to live and cope without drugs and booze.

[redacted] SAID he was hesitant about signing himself into the Straight program.

He sat through a rap session with other teens who had problems with drugs "and it really moved me. But I didn't want to admit it. I was touched, but I didn't want to admit that, either."

But after a frank discussion with his mother, he signed up.

Several weeks later, he questioned whether he had done the right thing.

"I kept asking myself, 'Why did I sign myself in? Why was I here? But at the same time, I knew there was nothing on the outside. Once I started to sort myself out, I felt relief and hope. I thought maybe things would be better and look up."

For Mike [redacted] things did look up. After eight months in Straight, he returned home, went to plumbing school and now works with his father. He has kicked his drug habit.

[redacted] parents, Richard and Marian [redacted] were highly active in establishing a Cincinnati chapter of Straight. They also formed Operation Wake-Up, a drug awareness group for parents in the Anderson Township area.

Their son is typical of the teenagers that Jerry Rushing, director of the newly founded Straight

program in Clermont County, deals with every day. THOSE ENTERING the program are usually age 13 to 18 with a serious drug problem. They drink, smoke pot and use any combination of other drugs—cocaine, hashish, uppers, downers, peyote, mushrooms, nitrous oxide, paint thinner, anything for a high.

"The nicest part about my job is seeing the little girl and little boy—the innocence of youth—come back out in these kids," Rushing said. "It's amazing how many kids say they feel their lives stopped when they started using drugs."

Rushing, a former drug counselor and therapist, is the director of Straight's newest branch, in Mount Repose, outside Milford.

Straight has been in operation for six years, and the Cincinnati-area branch is Straight's fourth satellite treatment center. Two others are in Florida and one is in Atlanta.

The local branch opened in early January when 55 Cincinnati-area teens who were attending the Straight program in St. Petersburg, Fla., were flown to Cincinnati as the seed group.

Since then, 10 teens have "graduated" from the program and 83 are now enrolled, most of them from the eastern Hamilton County area.

STRAIGHT RELIES on former drug abusers and Straight graduates to handle the day-to-day, intense counseling. It relies on a philosophy that peer pressure turned the youths to drugs, and peer pressure will turn them away.

As teens examine their history of drug abuse, they re-learn responsibility, work, honesty and respect for authority by earning privileges that allow them to move through the seven phases of the program. It uses many of the philosophies of Alcoholics Anonymous.

"Kids get caught up in drugs in such a subtle way," Rushing said. "Alcohol and pot, I think, are the most damaging drugs because they're so subtle. They just rob the kids of their human spirit."

For many teens, the pattern is the same. They become uncommunicative and withdrawn from



JERRY RUSHING, left, interviews a young man interested in joining the Straight

their families. They may adopt new friends. They spend more time alone. Some lose their jobs.

Rushing said he is aware of the criticism directed against the Straight approach. He is aware that some people consider it brainwashing at the hands of people who force teen-agers to sign into the program.

"We are conservative in the eyes of a lot of people because we do take a hard line about drug abuse," Rushing said. "We've been criticized because of our conservative views, but there are so many times we can say, 'I told you so,' because kids are still dying from it."

"WE HAVE nothing to hide here and I don't mind opening up the program so people can see what's going on. But I'm not going to open the doors so people can nitpick Straight to death."

Each entering teen is screened through personal interviews and interviews with the family to assess how drug use is affecting achievement, family relations, jobs and other factors.

It is during this session, when teens must sign themselves into the program, that much of the criticism arises about "coercion," threats of court orders and harassment.

But Rushing said most of the "coercion" comes from distraught parents who have tried other types of treatment or counseling and

are at wit's end with their own children.

"Straight is a tough program," he said. "Usually it's a last resort for parents who are pretty much to the point of saying to their kid, 'Either you get help or you get kicked out of the house and we'll press charges for all the things you stole from us.'"

RUSHING POINTS out that Straight has no legal authority to seek court orders to admit teens to the program.

But if a teen balks at signing himself in, Rushing said he will leave the room, go to the parents and ask them if they are willing to press charges. Then, Rushing tells the teen that legal action is possible.

Teens who are court-ordered into Straight must remain with the program two years, Rushing said. Teens who sign themselves in, work through at their own pace, with the average stay 11 months.

"Generally, if a kid is court-ordered here, it's not because of their drug use. It's because of their breaking the law," he said.

And Rushing said he understands how people can conclude there's brainwashing going on "because the kids change so drastically."

But what Straight does is isolate a drug-using teen from his environment and re-teach societal values, he said.



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JERRY RUSHING, left, interviews a young man interested in joining the Straight program.

Photo for The Enquirer BY DAVID KOHL

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