

Seeking to set things straight

The psychiatrist was confused. "What did you do to this kid?" he asked Rosemary Weaver.

The kid was her 14-year-old son, Eric. He was deeply withdrawn, depressed, quiet. His eyes looked funny. His forearms looked raw. For weeks he'd been gouging them with his own fingernails and the tines of plastic forks.

"Straight," Weaver told the doctor.

"Straight," he asked.

Now it was her turn for confusion. How could anyone not know about Straight Inc., the high-intensity, drug-treatment program for adolescents. After all, this was the summer of 1985.

Straight had been in Greater Cincinnati since 1982, making headlines, treating hundreds of kids, attracting grants from the city's biggest corporations. It had even been visited by first lady Nancy Reagan, who wept during an emotion-packed meeting.

Straight had a way of evoking strong feelings as well as sharp opinions. People seemed to praise it or curse it. The convenient label was "controversial," but that didn't explain Straight's confrontational style, strict rules and underlying belief that kids could best pressure each other away from drugs.

Uncovering truths

So Rosemary and Bob Weaver began to tell the psychiatrist what they knew. Most clients stay in the program about 11 months. They removed their son after three. Something had gone very wrong with Eric.

At first they had only a vague sense of why he was so traumatized. Indeed, the Weavers would have as much to learn as to teach. Their fact-finding mission consumed much of the last four years, involved them in lawsuits and opened their private crisis to public inspection.

It began with a revelation from specialists in another drug-treatment program: The boy didn't fit the profile for chemical dependency. He had experimented sparsely with drugs. No more.

But at Straight he was handled like all the others — as a "druggie," flirting with death. He was led around by the belt loops, watched constantly, prodded by peers and staff to confess bad behavior, boarded at other kids' homes where the windows were nailed shut and the bed-

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The Weavers found other kids who’d been in the program at the same time. They confirmed his accounts. One boy recalled rug burns on Eric’s face. The Weavers sued Straight for \$1 million. Program officials denied their allegations, including physical abuse.

But, according to Bob Weaver, “We weren’t just saying that someone flipped out and brutalized Eric. We said the program itself is the problem.”

Although Cincinnati’s Straight closed last year due to dwindling enrollments, the program continues in six other states.

Settlement reached

The Weavers got their day in court this spring. Their first witness was a former client and staff member. Under oath, he described how the local Straight operated and said force was routinely used, even ordered, on kids who wouldn’t comply.

The same day, Straight offered the Weavers a settlement. It was not an admission of wrongdoing. Nor was the amount ever to be revealed. On the advice of their attorneys, the Weavers accepted it.

But the settlement did not bring peace. Money had never been their goal. Accountability was. And governmental oversight. In Ohio, anyone can hang out a shingle and offer drug treatment. Licensure and certification are not required.

The Weavers want other parents to pass for drug treatment and question its long-term effects. “I’d also like to tell people something about the hype about

She knows that to suggest such a thing sounds irresponsible, almost heretical. Yet her family knows well the fear of drugs. They know just as well the consequences of fearing them too much. The healing is long and slow.

Camilla Warrick's column appears