

Drug Abuse Program Turned Markhams Into True Believers

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Thirty-five teen-agers from Cincinnati have been sent to Florida in the last several years so they could be treated for serious drug problems.

Two of those teen-agers were Tom Markham's sons from Anderson Township.

They had been getting worse grades than before and were hanging around with different friends, and Markham didn't know what was going on.

"WE WERE naive and didn't want to recognize that they had a drug problem. We were concerned and fearful, but we were certainly naive," Markham said Tuesday. "We were extremely concerned about the direction our sons were going, and we seemed to be unable to correct the drift."

Through an Anderson Township drug awareness program for parents, Markham and his wife discovered that their older son, a 19-year-old college freshman, was getting progressively lower grades because he had a problem with drugs.

And they noticed the same potential in their 15-year-old son.

"After an awful lot of talking and soul-searching, we made a decision to go to Straight," a drug rehabilitation program based in St. Petersburg, Fla., Markham said.

The Straight program, founded in 1979, is an intensive, long-term rehabilitation program for adolescents who have problems with drugs—alcohol, marijuana, poppers, speed, Quaaludes, or harder drugs.

It stresses positive peer pressure from other youngsters who have gone through the Straight program successfully and deals with the dynamics of the entire family, not just the problem teen-ager.

"THE STRAIGHT program is built around a family commitment," explained Markham, who now is spearheading a campaign to bring a Straight branch to Cincinnati. "It's not some place you send a kid to get fixed. The family is involved in the program."

After supporting his children in the program for more than a year, Markham sees marked differences in his sons. And he is grateful.

"I am ecstatic about our boys. I couldn't be happier," he said. "I feel awfully good about where they stand and their ability to live out their lives to the best of their ability. Last year, I didn't feel that way."

The Straight program involves a three-phase, long-term process.

"With this type of program, 30 days is usually not long enough or intense enough to turn around a person's behavior patterns," said Jim Hartz, executive director of Straight.

A teen-ager's average stay in Straight is 10-11 months, Hartz said. Costs to the family range from \$700 to \$1,500, depending on family income, with a nominal charge for food. The fees are constant, no matter how long an adolescent is in the program.

STRAIGHT CURRENTLY has three full-time programs with 300 youngsters in St. Petersburg; 140 in Sarasota, Fla.; and 105 in Atlanta, Ga.; the newest branch program.

Hartz estimated Straight takes in 30-35 new teen-agers each month.

In the case of Markham's boys, both were sent to Florida to go through the program.

Twice a week for the first six weeks, the boys and their parents met with Straight's trained counselors.

They discussed the drug problems and the family problems.

"It's up to the family to impart its own values and morals and to get a kid free of drugs, and it's done with positive peer pressure," Markham explained.

If the youngster is from out of town, he or she stays with a foster family familiar with Straight.

Straight also relies heavily on peer counselors—former "druggies" who have gone through Straight and have not returned to the drug habit.

AS THE months progress, each youngster gains more and more individual responsibilities, until the final months, when he or she attends Straight programs only three evenings a week.

Hartz said Straight has a 50% success rate—half the youngsters who finish the program stay off drugs for at least a year.

But for many families, sending their children to Florida from Cincinnati is too expensive or not worth the bother.

That's why Markham, with Indian Hill School Superintendent Robert Boston, wants to bring a Straight program to Cincinnati.

"We want to take a proven program, transplant it to Cincinnati, and do in Cincinnati what's been done down there," he said. "We're doing so because of our commitment to Straight. We're not trying to re-invent the wheel. We will be using a proven program."