

Made a searching and honest moral inventory of myself daily.

Admitted to God myself and another human being the exact nature of my wrongs unreservedly.

Made direct appeals to such people whenever possible even when to do so would injure them, myself or others.



Staff counselors choose the next person to speak during a Straight rap session.

Photographer PATRICK REDDY

Challenging Straight

Lawsuits say drug program violates rights

Last of five articles

By Nancy Berlier
Post Staff Reporter

MT. REPOSE, Ohio — Straight Inc. is not for everyone.

On that point staff members at the controversial drug rehabilitation center and critics of the program agree.

Straight is not for the experimental drug user or people who are mentally ill, have learning disabilities or medical problems, according to David Crock, assistant director at the Mt. Repose center.

STRAIGHT IS FOR young people 12 to 22 who have become chemically dependent. It works, Crock says, because it is intensive, long-term and based on the premise that peer pressure can get kids off drugs just as it can get them hooked.

So what makes Straight controversial?

"They run very close to really performing psychic murder," contends Marge Robertson, executive director of the Cincinnati Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

"Somewhere, someone doesn't like the way a kid is behaving," she says. "In order to create a kid we can live with, we break them down."

Mrs. Robertson has been collecting information about Straight's activities in Mt. Repose since February, one month after the center opened. Complaints from Straight dropouts about physical and verbal abuse have led Mrs. Robertson to the conclusion that Straight "sounds like a concentration camp for throwaway kids."

"I DON'T think most of the kids out there are the wrecks their parents think they are," she says.

While Mrs. Robertson criticized Straight's treatment methods, a former supporter of the program criticized what he believes is a lack of built-in safeguards.

Steve Katkin, a counselor with the Clermont County Mental Health Board, dropped out of Straight's early support group over the issue of internal moni-



toring. Katkin joined Kids Helping Kids, a Northern Kentucky organization modeled after Straight. Kids Helping Kids also uses intensive, long-term peer counseling, but relies less on junior staff paraprofessional counselors.

THE LACK of adult staff monitoring at Straight leaves open the possibility of physical abuse, especially at the end of lengthy, fatiguing days when kids can become "harsh" toward others, Katkin maintains.

"I have talked to kids in the (St. Petersburg, Fla.) Straight program ... They have been, at times, physically abused," he contends.

A federal lawsuit filed in Virginia this month alleges that several youths were abused in the St. Petersburg program before being transferred to a new center in Fairfax County, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C. The class action suit seeks an injunction to close the Virginia center.

IN AFFIDAVITS filed in support of the lawsuit:

- A 20-year-old college student maintains he was held in Straight against his will and that Straight's "false and malicious brainwashing techniques" have convinced his parents that he is a "drug-crazed, worthless individual." He says he believes his 15-year-old brother remains in Straight against his will.

- An Arlington, Va., attorney contends Straight denied him access to an 18-year-old client he believes was kidnapped and is being held against his will by Straight.

- A 17-year-old Chantilly, Va., girl alleges her punishment for not participating in discussions at the St. Petersburg center was to stand in a restroom for 9½ hours while other girls cursed her and

held her as another girl rammed her head into the 17-year-old's stomach.

- The 17-year-old's mother, who was instrumental in starting the Virginia center, maintains that her daughter left the program with open sores on her back and arms because of a condition her physician diagnosed as complete physical debilitation.

- A former Fairfax County, Va., judge says he has been denied the right to see his two sons in the program.

- A 15-year-old Springfield, Va., girl alleges that Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight, grabbed her by the hair and threw her to the floor in a rap session at St. Petersburg. She says Newton instructed the staff to put her through a marathon, in which she was kept awake for more than 80 hours while other girls screamed and poked at her.

ALTHOUGH THE Mt. Repose center has been involved in litigation over parents' visitation rights, no lawsuits have alleged physical abuse.

As for the criticisms of the program's methods, Crock and Beverly Hardy, program coordinator at the Mt. Repose center, take exception.

Far from breaking down personalities, as Mrs. Robertson suggests, Crock and Mrs. Hardy insist that Straight teaches young people the same moral values their parents espouse and gives them the strength to resist pressure from their friends.

"When you are using drugs, you're already feeling guilt and shame, and your moral values are being broken down, disintegrating," Mrs. Hardy says. "When someone approaches you with another idea, like, 'Let's go to bed,' normally you would have that normal value to tell them 'No.'"

DESPITE KATKIN'S criticism, he says he believes the long-term peer pressure model used by Straight and Kids Helping Kids is "one of the most effective ways of dealing with drug problems in adolescents."

"Other than Straight and Kids Helping Kids, I don't see any alternative for the serious drug problem among kids," Katkin says.

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By Nancy Seiler
First Story Magazine

The Straight story

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• An Allington, Va., attorney contends Straight denied him access to an 18-year-old client he believes was kidnapped and is being held against his will by Straight.

• A 17-year-old Chesapeake, Va., girl alleges her punishment for not participating in discussions at the St. Petersburg center was to stand in a restroom for 24 hours while other girls cursed her and

held her as another girl rammed her head into the 17-year-old's stomach.

• The 17-year-old's mother, who was instrumental in starting the Virginia center, maintains that her daughter left the program with open sores on her back and arms because of a condition her physician diagnosed as complete physical debilitation.

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What it costs parents to get youth off drugs

What's the going price for getting a youth off drugs?

It costs parents \$250 for Straight Inc.'s program, no matter how long a youth remains in the program. The average length is 11 months. Parents pay an additional \$100 monthly food fee and the into their wallets in twice-weekly meetings to help the financially strapped families of Straight clients. Parents also are contributing money for a building expansion.

By comparison, it costs a maximum of \$200 for six months in the Residential Youth Treat-

ment Program in Howe House at Drake Heights. However, that program is subsidized by the Hamilton County Community Mental Health Board with a sliding fee for parents who cannot afford the \$25-per-day maximum charge.

Only weeks in the Care Unit Hospital of Cincinnati, located in the former St. George Hospital, and the only drug hospital specializing in drug treatment for adolescents, costs about \$200. The cost is covered by most hospitalization insurance policies.

• Kids Helping Kids in Sturton, Ky.,

costs a maximum of \$150, plus a monthly food fee. The average length of treatment is 11 months.

• Teen Challenge, supported by some area churches, is free, but limited to young men 18 and older. Clients are charged \$100 initially and remain in the program's treatment centers in Milford and Cincinnati for about six months.

• Other area hospitals treat chemically dependent youths at standard hospitalization costs in psychiatric or adolescent medicine departments.