

STRAIGHT: TREATMENT OR ABUSE FOR YOUNG DRUG USERS? - PROGRAM SEEKS STATE OK AMID LOUD PROTEST

Sun, The (Baltimore, MD) - August 11, 1991

- Author/Byline: Staff writer; Michael James
- Edition: HOWARD SUN (ZONED TABLOID)
- Section: NEWS
- Page: 2

Ross ██████, 20, became furious this week when he saw six people picketing Straight Inc., a controversial drug treatment program he says saved his life.

"I felt rageful. I felt out of control and I started crying. It was like a personal insult to me and for the people who care about me," said Herring, who said he has remained drug-free and sober for 10 months in the Straight program.

Another Straight client, Jason, 17, who asked that his last name not be used, told his peers at a Straight counseling session that "I almost died from alcohol. If Straight doesn't help me, I don't know who will."

But despite the support of recovering substance abusers like Ross and Jason, the past week has been a particularly tough one for Straight, which has been accused by opponents as being abusive to children.

The program has applied for certification in Maryland after being forced out of Virginia by state regulators. If the Columbia facility -- which opened July 29 in the Oakland Ridge Industrial Park -- fails to receive state certification, it will be forced to cease operations in Maryland.

Eugene J. Nieto, a Straight executive who is fighting to keep the program's doors open in Maryland, watched television coverage Monday of protesters' claims that Straight deprived clients of sleep, food and personal dignity.

"I thought, 'My God, they've got to be kidding,' " Nieto said. "You think we put these kids in a cell and keep food from them morning, noon and night? That we stand over them and shake them if they fall asleep? It's absolutely ludicrous. Why are they saying it?"

Nieto acknowledges the program has made mistakes, and he said key changes have been made in Straight's policies.

Chief among them, Nieto said, is that the program no longer uses restraining force against clients. It also will begin on-site education for school-age children.

"We believe we're on the cutting edge of a highly successful rehabilitation technique that is getting better as we go along," Nieto said. "I think Maryland is a progressive state that will accept our unique modality."

Straight, which currently treats about 1,000 youngsters in eight locations across the country, claims the highest success rate -- about 70 percent -- of any rehab program. The private, non-profit enterprise uses Alcoholics Anonymous' 12 steps to recovery, but places heavy emphasis on peer pressure.

Nieto and other Straight administrators are confident the program, which costs \$6,000 to \$18,000 per patient annually, will pass certification. They have high hopes for the Maryland facility, which will serve about 70 clients from the Mid-Atlantic region.

However, program officials say they will stand firm on their controversial policy not to allow parents to speak to their son or daughter without a Straight counselor present -- a policy that has prompted a firestorm of criticism since the program began in 1976.

Opponents point to the policy as indicative of how Straight refuses to let parents hear the true story behind the therapy their child is undergoing.

"They know that we'd leave if we could, or that we'd tell our parents what's really going on," said Laura Faehner, 18, of Olney, who spent two years in Straight.

Straight, however, contends that therapy focuses not only on the adolescent, but parents as well. Parents are required to attend "rap sessions" with their children every Monday and Friday night.

"These families have been in a destructive confrontation mode before they've come here. They have to learn to talk to these kids all over again," Nieto said.

"We approach the problem from the perspective that the family is dysfunctional. The heat between parent and child is intense, and we try to dissipate that."

But for the protesters, who expect to picket the Straight office in Columbia twice a week while state inspectors determine the program's fate, there is still rage and mistrust in Straight.

"There's no other way to run Straight other than the way they run it now," said Brian DeCunzo, 18, who spent 101 days in Straight's Springfield, Va., facility when he was 15. "They run it like a jail and they'll tell you that it has to be that way to work.

"I once watched a kid get his face bashed in. Does that sound like therapy?"

Leading the local opposition in Howard County is Families Against Destructive Drug Rehabs, a small group of parents and former clients of Straight.

"I don't pretend to have the final answer. I just don't want them open," said Greg Reight, a member of the group whose son spent 128 days in Straight four years ago. "They starved my kid. What does denial of food have to do with drug rehabilitation?"

Straight officials say they do not impose food restrictions on clients and argue that opponents are looking for someone to blame.

"Many of the people speaking out against the program had a child that lasted only three or four months, and then quit," said Duke Cross, a spokesman for Straight's Columbia office. "This is a long-term program. There are no quick fixes. But the family will blame us if the child doesn't succeed."

At a counseling session Thursday, 30 youths -- who spend seven days a week in counseling and return to a host family during the evenings -- spoke openly about their problems while others advised and coached them.

"I used to think doing drugs was so cool that I used to tell my friends that I was doing drugs I hadn't even tried yet," said one boy. "I wanted them to think that I was a big druggie. That's what was important to me."

After each youth tells of his experiences, the group yells in unison, "I love you." Many of the youths also say, "I don't think any less of you for what you said and I still support you."

Another boy tells of how "people used to look at me like I was some kind of sick person. They'd ask me, 'How can you be that way? Your life is a waste.'" At times, others stand, look him in the eye, and ask what progress he has made.

Nieto said in the early days of Straight, violent confrontations occurred when counselors got carried away with their jobs.

"If a kid was going cold turkey, and he decided he was going to try and run away, his friends would jump him. They would hold him down," Nieto said. "To them, that was the way they told the child, 'You can't go back to the way you were.'"

But such restraining methods led to injury and are now discouraged, he said. "The word now is that everyone is told there is to be no force, no restraining. If a kid wants to walk out, he can walk out."

- Caption: PHOTO PHOTO Peer support, such as that demonstrated by Ross [REDACTED] (right) is a major component of Straight's drug rehabilitation philosophy. Opponents claim that once teens pass through Straight's doors, they are treated as if they are in jail, facing deprivation of food, sleep and dignity. PHOTO 1 THE HOWARD COUNTY SUN -- GEORGE HOLSEY PHOTO 2 THE HOWARD COUNTY SUN -- GEORGE HOLSEY

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