

STRAIGHT GETS APPROVAL BUT STAYS CONTROVERSIAL - 1991: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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6 Few issues fuel as much righteous indignation as the debate over Straight Inc.

Opponents call it a cult that abuses children. Supporters call it a lifesaver and the most effective solution to the nation's overwhelming drug problem.

If there is a middle ground, it is held by state officials, who have the thankless job of trying to determine whose arguments have the most validity.

The national drug treatment program, which emphasizes peer pressure and strict motivational therapy, left Virginia amid a firestorm of criticism and opened its Columbia facility July 29.

About 40 adolescents attend the program, which claims to have the highest rehabilitation success rate of any treatment method.

Protesters immediately began picketing the building and lobbied state health officials to close it down, while Straight administrators began a public image campaign and invited reporters in to see the "true story."

The therapy sessions, in which Straight clients sit, at times, for eight hours or more, are emotion-filled. Many clients and parents speak openly about how the program has saved their lives.

But some former program members maintain that they were deprived of sleep, food and personal rights and that the program crosses the line between treatment and abuse.

After initially being told that the program did not meet state standards for licensing, Straight officials won conditional certification to operate in Maryland.

The program, which remains on a one-year probation by the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, faces many hurdles in 1992.

Some violations have been identified, but Straight has made apparent good-faith efforts to work out the problems.

Whether or not it wins final approval from state officials, Straight will continue to face criticism from the public. Its opponents speak of a war of sorts, and as such, the war seems inclined to go on.

- Caption: PHOTO(S) Straight Inc., which won a probationary one-year approval from the state, has been criticized as abusive. PHOTO THE HOWARD COUNTY SUN -- FILE

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