

Interview With Former Executive Staff –

name/identity withheld by request

Questions Compiled by Straight Survivors Christine Flannery,

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Education/Qualifications Questions

- 1) **Were you a client of Straight that was promoted to executive from within or were you hired from “the outside”?** Outside
- 2) **How did you find out about the job opening at Straight?** Newspaper ad
- 3) **What prompted you to want to work at Straight? Why did you apply for that job?** I wanted to work with troubled kids.
- 4) **What were your qualifications to be on executive staff? What was your professional background?**
 - a. **Did you have any college education relevant to substance abuse, counseling, psychology, or similar fields before joining Straight’s executive staff?** Bachelors and Masters in Psychology
 - b. **Did you have relevant work experience prior to Straight or was this your first job out of college?** I worked at the juvenile detention center as a paraprofessional. Straight loved hiring people that were not highly experienced at other programs because they wanted us to learn the Straight way.
- 5) **Once hired for Straight’s executive staff, what kind of training did you receive?** 3 months in Florida, working at the St Pete location with the Executive Staff and peer staff.
- 6) **How and why did you eventually leave your position at Straight?** Disagreement with the Executive Director. We both agreed it would be best for me to find other work. I stayed until I found that position.
- 7) **What type of employment did you seek immediately after Straight?** Mental health/substance abuse counselor in an in-patient psychiatric unit.

Questions About Duties Performed As Executive Staff

- 1) **What years were you employed by Straight?** The eighties.
- 2) **What was your job description at Straight?** Marketing, public speaking, leading group raps, intakes/assessments, family therapy, educational group and support groups for the family.

individual counseling, leading girl's group, conducting Friday night meetings as assigned, home checks to ascertain if a home is suitable to be a host home, be on-call.

- 3) **What were your first impressions of the design of the program?** Incredibly impressed. I believed it was saving lives of kids for whom no other programs worked. I had recently watched the movie, "Not My Kid" and believed the program was going to be like the movie.
 - a. **After you left Straight, did your opinions about the program change over time? If so, how?** How sad it was. I still believed in the principles, but believed it was becoming kid-controlled and not following the guidelines by which I was trained, such as who was appropriate for admission and who was not.
- 4) **How do you currently view the design of the program?** Obviously, I now understand what brain-washing is and how that is not in the best interest of the kids. The peer staff should not have been in control, especially doing what could be conceived as mental health work of any kind. I don't have any idea how the host homes could have been safe and secure. The idea should have worked, in a perfect world.
- 5) **When first hired, what did you think of some of Straights bizarre tactics such as beltlooping, motivating, kids watching kids use the bathroom etc?** They made sense when explained to me in the beginning. I don't recall kids ever actually watching other kids use the bathroom. I know they stood near, but not watching.
 - a. **If you were first shocked by these things, how did you come to accept these practices as being ok?** No, I was not shocked. I know how out of control these kids were, and to "take control" until they earned it back made sense. I was so naïve.
- 6) **Was abuse ever reported to you by a client or peer staff member? How did you handle those reports?** Absolutely no abuse was ever reported to me. I would have called CPS. The only abusive behavior I witnessed was the one that ended my career at Straight because I tried to intervene.
- 7) **Did you receive other client complaints about Straight? How did you respond to those complaints?** I saw them as just kid whining because they wanted out of the program. When someone did have valid concerns I would pull the kid from rap group and listen, exploring resolutions.
- 8) **At various times during Straight, Inc.'s history, client records were created (when one didn't exist) or altered by clients and staff prior to impending inspections, investigations, etc. Were you aware that this was happening?** Absolutely not. I would never have condoned this.
 - a. **If so, please elaborate – what did you know and what was your reaction to this?**
- 9) **Throughout Straight's history, Straight's version of confidentiality was overly broad and at times was used to avoid answering legitimate questions by the press/oversight agencies/law enforcement etc.**
 - a. **Did your superiors at Straight, any other executive or group staff member ever instruct you to withhold information or fail to report something to hinder a child welfare agency, state agency or law enforcement investigation or press inquiries?** No, I was never asked to
 - i. **IE. things that should have been reported such as abuse – not things legitimately falling within client confidentiality.**

- 10) **Did you provide any professional, individual counseling/therapy to any Straight clients?** Yes. As needed. I regret it was not regularly. The primary change was considered to have occurred in big group. I would pull the kids out as an issue came up or if he/she was returned after running.
- If so, how often? Approximately how many clients?** I don't recall.
 - If so, did you counsel an individual on an ongoing basis, periodically or was it an isolated, one time session?** It was sporadic, as mentioned above. I want to think it was more than once. I know I would regularly do family therapy.
- 11) **Did you know anything about the financial dealings of the program?** Little
- To your knowledge, was anything illegal or unethical done in this regard by your superiors?** Yes, the Dallas program had supporters with deep pockets. They were given authority and access to client and family information they were not ethically supposed to have just because they gave a lot of money and engaged in fundraisers. These financial supporters were able to get people jobs they did not have the credentials/experience to do. They let these people sit in on groups and family events, breaking confidentiality. It was all done to make money.
- 12) **Did Straight marketing/sales goals or pressure from Straight superiors ever influence you to accept clients into Straight?** Not marketing goals. I was just told to admit the kids based on the parent's concerns alone, not clinical criteria. I'm sure it was about keeping census up. This started just before I left.
- 13) **Many former peer staff have disclosed that they were not allowed to express concerns/disagreement about anything Straight did. Sometimes peer staff would be fired for this.**
- Did you ever share concerns or express disagreement with another executive staff member about any of Straight's practices?** Ha! I disagreed with what junior staff did (full restraint) on a kid because he got angry. I was confronted and asked by the director what was wrong with me. It was then we agreed I would find employment elsewhere.
 - If so, did they take those concerns seriously and try to address them or did they ignore them, or threaten to fire you because you expressed those concerns?** The latter. The peer staff were in control. No one was allowed to complain although we may have discussed it amongst ourselves.

Questions About Specific Straight Practices

- 1) **What are your thoughts on the so-called therapy that was provided? (today, looking back) For example, Straight used "attack therapy," or, put another way, "tear them down and rebuild them." Straight first destroyed the kid; emotionally, their psyche, their individuality, their identity...Straight forced the kid to "hit rock bottom."**
- What are your views on this tactic, back then and now?** That was not uncommon in chemical dependency treatment in the 80s. The fact that I knew how to do that came in handy when seeking my next job. It was probably not until the late 1980s, early 1990 that treatment got kinder.

- b. **What are your views on the intense “peer pressure” (coercion) to get honest? Were you aware (then, and now) that this resulted in many false confessions? It should have worked. It didn’t. Had professional staff been able to develop close relationships with the clients, we could have helped determine if confessions were authentic or coerced.**
- 2) **In Straight, confrontation was brutal – name calling, swearing, verbal attacks/abuse, spitting, belittling, humiliating, traumatizing etc.**
 - a. **Did you ever witness confrontations as described above? No, I did not. I think in the early days of Dallas program we wanted to stay as close to what the program was originally intended to be. Then it quickly spiraled out of control.**
 - b. **What are your thoughts on this practice, then and now? Not necessary and can be considered abusive.**
- 3) **“Spit therapy” - Sometimes the confrontation was done in close proximity to the victim and sometimes spit would fly in the victim’s face. The victim would not be permitted to wipe the spit off their face. They would have to stand there and just take it.**
 - a. **Were you aware that this happened? Not that I recall, but considering the verbal confrontations were aggressive, I would not be surprised.**
 - b. **What are your thoughts on this practice? Demeaning, provoking.**
- 4) **Host homes – Over the years Straight host home practices were attacked as a zoning violation, being an unlicensed foster home, a violation of fire/safety codes etc, and had other serious flaws.**
 - a. **What were your thoughts on these host home issues back then? Thoughts now?**
I think the original concept was good. It is idealistic to think it would work. A few homes truly fostered healthy relationships and were supportive, sometimes providing the first or only stable home the kids had ever known. Of course, there is no way we could have guaranteed the kid’s safety, nor should kids be responsible for other kid’s well-being in such an intensive manner. Parents who are untrained and, like kids, were coerced to serve as foster families and were often ill-equipped. Many of these parents were troubled people, as well.
- 5) **Kids restrained other kids for minor infractions routinely throughout Straight’s history. But in countless newspaper articles, Straight officials always claimed it was only done when a kid was a danger to himself or others and done by staff, which was not true... So, my question is...**
 - a. **What did/do you think about kids being allowed to restrain kids, then and now?**
Totally against. At first we were told this was going to be kids caring for kids, talking them down, keeping them safe. It quickly became a power trip and was misused, in my opinion.
 - i. **Were you aware that kids were restraining other kids for minor things, to coerce compliance? I became aware.**
 - b. **Why do you think Straight officials misrepresented what was really happening? I have no idea, other than wanting to save their jobs.**
- 6) **Kids were also regularly held in isolation in intake rooms for minor infractions to coerce compliance and a lot of abuse occurred in these intake rooms. So my question is...**

- a. **Were you aware that kids were frequently being held in intake rooms for minor infractions to coerce compliance?** No. The Dallas intake rooms were in the front of the office and such incidents would be too conspicuous to others coming in.
 - b. **If so, what did/do you think about this practice, use of isolation to break the kid, to coerce compliance, then and now?** I don't recall knowledge of such. Not surprised.
 - c. **Were you aware of physical abuse that sometimes occurred in intake rooms?** Absolutely unaware. I would never have tolerated physical abuse. I wish I had identified emotional abuse for what it was.
- 7) **Sometimes kids in group showed signs of mental illness. For example, it was common to see kids carve in their arms. But instead of empathy, these kids were viciously attacked in group, ridiculed and humiliated for carving.**
 - a. **Why were kids allowed to mistreat these children who obviously needed help?** Kids did not cut back then. Those who needed mental help were chewed up, just like the others. It was the blind leading the blind. I recall they did order a psychiatric evaluation for a kid. I picked it up from the psychologist myself. I don't know what they did with it.
 - b. **Did you or any other executive staff member ever provide professional counseling for these kids?** Yes, when allowed. Individual therapy was not a priority. I don't recall making any mental health treatment plans on any of the kids, ever.
 - c. **If so, how often?** Family counseling was considered most important as the family needed to heal together. I would pull a kid from group for individual therapy if I saw the kid too withdrawn, too rageful, or after running. If trauma was brought up in a group setting I would talk with them with probably poor follow-through.
- 8) **Were certain kids singled out for forms of extreme treatment from staff and the group?**
 - a. **Why?** The more defiant kids were probably most targeted. They wanted to break their spirit.
 - b. **Based on what traits?** Verbosity, tough attitude, resistance to the program. Or the kids who did wanted to glorify his/her drug use.
 - c. **What was the end goal of that?** Varied. They loved to get the kids to cry. Then they would be supportive.
- 9) **Beltlooping – Straight taught that this was done to show we cared, that kids lost their right to freedom and had to earn it back, that the kid couldn't be trusted etc. But it was humiliating, degrading, traumatic and obviously done to prevent escape and to exert control over the newcomer.**
 - a. **What are your thoughts on beltlooping, then and now?** I bought into its purpose. Now, I can see how it can be misused and misconstrued.
- 10) **Watching kids in bathroom – Straight taught this was done to prevent suicide attempts, that they couldn't be trusted so the newcomer was watched, stared at, by an oldcomer while urinating, defecating, showering etc. This, in part, caused weeks of constipation, was humiliating, degrading, demoralizing, traumatic and seemed like yet another way to exert total control over the newcomer.**

- a. **What are your thoughts on the practice of watching someone urinate/defecate/shower, then and now?** I don't believe that it how it was supposed to be in the beginning. Admittedly, I was not that involved with the host home situations.
- 11) **Kidnapping adults - Throughout Straight's history, Straight had a habit of kidnapping adults to forcibly re-enroll a client in Straight, who was 18 or older. This was frequently justified as "necessary to save the adult's life," to prevent death or jail. This was sometimes done for tiny infractions. It was obviously illegal but Straight did it all the time.**
 - a. **What are your thoughts on this practice, then and now?** I never saw it happen. That would have gone against what I was taught in the beginning. Obviously, any kind of kidnapping or holding an adult against his/her will is illegal and unethical.

Kids Ran Straight Inc.???

Kids in Straight were given almost total and complete control over each other – oldcomers wrote progress reports on newcomers. Kids had almost no adult supervision in the host home. Adults were in the house but most times the oldcomers ran the host homes, told the parents what they could or could not do etc. Kids enforced the rules. Kids spend the majority of the time locked/alarmed in the phaser room where there were no adults. Teenage oldcomers/staff (in group or the host home) controlled when newcomers were allowed to speak, use a restroom, and when the newcomer could move about, with or without beltlooping. Kids in group were required to restrain each other, conduct intakes, provide "therapy" - evaluate each other in group, "relate to" each other, confront each other, etc. The child staff conducted the vast majority of raps and had the power to set back or start over a client on the spot, wrote up progress reports on clients and played a significant role in decisions made about clients progress, to advance a phase or not etc. **THIS IS ALL CORRECT.**

Untrained teenagers, in some cases very emotionally/psychologically disturbed children, and in other cases very abusive adolescents ran the vast majority of day to day activities of Straight Inc and had almost complete control over each other. **AGREED**

- 1) **What did you think about the lack of adults supervision of the daily activities? (Then and now?)**

We were kept busy out of the group room and told to leave peer staff alone. I would often go sit in group, however, so that I could understand the conversations and what was happening. I wanted to be aware of my client's progress.
- 2) **What did you think of how much control kids were given over other kids? (Then and now) I**

saw it becoming a growing problem and was ultimately a major reason I left. I became disillusioned.

Questions about Intake Process

- 1) **What are your thoughts on the intake process? (today, looking back)** I may have a tool we used to identify if the client had substance abuse, misuse, or dependence. I will get it to you if I can

find it. I think the intake process made sense, in the beginning. Professionals and peer staff were involved. Professional staff (or the director) was ultimately responsible for the admission decision.

- 2) **Did you ever knowingly approve a client's admission that had never used drugs, or was not chemically dependent? If so, why?** At the end, I was told to admit a client's sibling simply based on the parent's concern. I was told the truth would come out and if the kid did not belong, he would be discharged after a few days. I did not believe that.
 - a. **If so, how did you think Straight, a drug rehab, would help someone without a drug/alcohol problem?** I did not believe it.
- 3) **Did you know that many of the kids in Straight, in general, did not have "a drug/alcohol problem"?**
 - a. **How did/do you feel about this, then and now?** It was questionable, then. I was told they would be admitted for evaluation.
- 4) **How did/do you feel about untrained teenage clients conducting intakes? Then and now?** When I was there they were supervised.
- 5) **Did you ever turn away a prospective client because you felt Straight was not the right program for them?** Yes.
- 6) **Were you aware that there were false confessions on intakes due to pressure to "get honest" and due to accusations of lying?** Not on intake, but later on in the program.

Denial of Medical Care/Health related issues

- 1) **Were you aware of clients having injuries or illnesses that did not receive prompt medical attention?** No, I was not
- 2) **Did you know that clients were sometimes denied reasonable, necessary medications such as aspirin, Tylenol, other reasonable over the counter medications?** No. I know we had a fully supplied medical room, medical exam table that was donated, and a skilled, caring pediatrician was there a couple of times per week to do intake exams and see them for medical issues.
- 3) **Did you know that clients were sometimes denied pain medication or anesthesia for surgical procedures/stitches, etc.?** I was not aware. I think these kinds of issues were kept from professional staff because they knew we would do something about neglect.
 - a. **If so, did you agree with this? Why or why not?** above
- 4) **When medication was allowed, who dispensed medication daily – peer staff or a nurse?** I don't recall, but it was probably senior staff.
- 5) **Sleep deprivation**
 - a. **Were you aware that most clients were denied sufficient sleep regularly, due to long group hours, long distance to host homes, early arrivals to the building?** Yes.
 - b. **Were you aware that oldcomers/peer staff sometimes deliberately kept a kid awake all night in order to extract drug use confessions or compliance to program rules?** No, I was not aware.

- 6) **Were you aware that peer staff frequently denied client access to bathrooms? Were you aware that as a result, kids sometimes had accidents and were forced to sit in their urine, feces or blood?** No, I would never condone that. I don't think that happened when I was there
- 7) **At times throughout Straight's history, girls who tested positive for pregnancy on intake were forced to have abortions by Straight. Were you aware that this was happening?** Absolutely not. I knew of one girl who chose an abortion. I remember her mother taking her.

Long Term Effects

- 1) **While you were employed by Straight, did you ever have concerns about the potential for harmful outcomes due to the design of the program?** Yes
- 2) **At the time you were an executive, were you aware that Straight was traumatic for some clients?** No
 - a. **Would you be surprised to learn that PTSD, cause by Straight, is very common among Straight survivors?** Not at all.
- 3) **Some people believe that Straight saved their life while others believe the same treatment was destructive and traumatic - how do you make sense of the polemic nature of the long-term effects?** That is a huge question. I think individual experiences mattered. I firmly believe the program disintegrated as it grew and evolved.

Many of the kids came in with psychiatric issues or extremely dysfunctional families. Some used drugs to self medicate because their lives were so horrible. Some kids were abused, from abusive homes. Some families really became strong and grew together.

Some kids had extensive legal histories when they came in, and being there did not help or change anything. Kids have varied coping strategies. Some did not have the ability to cope with what they endured at Straight. Some kids had good, supportive host homes and therefore, less likelihood of enduring trauma, and some were terrorized by the foster homes. Their experiences and ability to cope were probably as unique as the kids were.
- 4) **Have you read survivor stories on the website Surviving Straight Inc? How did you feel about them or how did you react to them?** Yes. I think they are justified. Some people thrive on being victims. That is how life goes. Some of them are justifiably angry and traumatized. I think the kids who were helped by the program and are happy in their adult lives don't get on the site. They are under-represented by the web site.

General Miscellaneous questions

- 1) **Did you believe you were helping kids?** ABSOLUTELY. At first I was very, very proud of being a part of such a dramatic, great program. I wanted to help these kids. I WAS ONE OF THEM IN MY YOUTH.
- 2) **What do you think about the program overall, today? How do you feel about Straight now? Any regrets?** I am ashamed of what it became and my alliance with the program. I regret my naivete.
- 3) **What prompted you to contact a Straight survivor? Why did you decide you are now willing to answer survivor questions?** Good question. I was curious. Honestly, I had no idea there was so

much trauma or what was alleged until I read the survivor's stories. I was not surprised or in denial about they experienced.

- 4) **Did you know there are books written about Straight? Would you be willing to read them?**
 - a. **The Dead Inside by Cyndy Etler (book 1)**
 - b. **We Can't Be Friends by Cyndy Etler (book 2)**
 - c. **Institutionalized Persuasion by Marcus Chatfield**
 - d. **Help At Any Cost by Maia Szalavitz (4 chapters – 2 about Straight, 2 about KIDS)**
I would love to read them, as time allows.
- 5) **Would you be willing to read the survivor request for an apology?**
 - a. http://survivingstraightinc.com/survivors_request_for_apology_1_apology_received
I have actually already read it and the response received.
 - b. **Would you be willing to issue a public apology on the website Surviving Straight Inc.? Why or why not?** No, I am not. I fear retribution and/or attorneys contacting me. It was long ago and the program I read about was not the program I was involved in. I honestly believe my only regret was staying so long and not understanding what needed to be reported to officials. I think the kids I worked with would agree (I hope).
- 6) **Do you think other former executive staff members want to come forward, but are afraid of retaliation, lawsuits, criminal responsibility or all the above?** Probably.
- 7) **When you were employed by Straight, what did you think of all the controversy surrounding Straight – newspaper articles/investigations/lawsuits etc?**
We did not have internet in those days. I did not hear about them until I researched Straight and found the survivors sites.
 - a. **Did any of these alter the way you viewed Straight?** Sad. It evolved into a monster.
 - b. **How did you make sense of complaints against the program?** Some must be very true.
- 8) **What are some things about Straight that you think are missing from the current discussions about the program?** N/A

Additional Comments

Is there anything you would like to say? Yes!!

- Some of the kids came in with serious criminal thinking and behavior. They were going to lead criminal lives no matter what. Straight did not necessarily make them criminals or put them in jail.
- Some kids/families were helped. It was great to see and experience. I have had Straight kids, now parents themselves, bring me their kids in my private psychotherapy practice. I had parents that brought their kids to Straight seek me out to do therapy, themselves, in the recent past. There must have been some faith.
- Not a pity party, but you need to know Executive Staff was sometimes treated the same way the phasers were. We were confronted by other staff, including junior and senior staff, just like kids were. I was told to lie about my past so that it would be exaggerated, and made to go to AA/NA meetings in order to keep my job although I only used drugs as a kid. Actually, I am grateful for

my 12 step knowledge, but I felt like a fraud in the meetings. I should have left Straight during my training in St Pete.

- My departure from Straight was precipitated by an incident where a kid was being escorted somewhere and said something to the staffers escorting him. They took him down in a full restraint. He started screaming and crying. I saw it all and did not feel it was necessary, but Executive Staff was not allowed to intervene in what peer staff was doing. I was reported by them to the director who called me in and asked what was wrong with me, that I was not blindly following protocol.
- When I was flown to St Pete for an interview, I stayed in a host home where the parents, unknowingly, had a say in if I was hired or not.
- I had been an out of control, substance abusing, angry kid. I could have seen me in such a program. My doing it right, helping these kids and their families, mattered to me. I think it mattered to most of the people I worked with. I know where several ex-Executive Staff are today and they are healthy people, not the demons one would think.
- Some members of the staff were unqualified. One “therapist” got a non-accredited type doctorate (they encouraged me to get my doctorate the same way) and had no training in treating adolescents or substance abuse. It was evident in their ‘counseling’ and vocabulary, but they were given clinical privileges.
- As mentioned above, some “counselors” were friends of benefactors.
- None of us were licensed at the time of providing counseling. I’m not sure it was necessary in the 80s. Now, of course, it is.
- I was told to lie, on occasion. That is when the tide started turning for me.
- I know my report is not what you were looking for. I think I worked there early in the program before it was so out of control. I hope you find what you need and what will help the survivors. I am sorry people were so hurt.
- Some parents were watching their kid die in front of them. They had been in and out of the legal system, doctors, counselors, treatment, with little to no progress. This is the kid Straight was intended to help. It is sad it evolved into something so evil.