

St. Petersburg Times

Publication Date: 5/5/87

Page: 1A

HD: Going Straight // Part 3: The parents" story

BY: DAVID FINKEL

SE: Going Straight

EX: In the day-to-day existence of Julie Kulek, it was the normal occurrence that showed her how abnormal her life had become.

It was the delivery man from Little Caesar"s Pizza, for instance, bringing the pepperoni pies. It was the neighbor who would drop by unexpectedly, wanting nothing more than a cup of sugar. It was merely opening the front door.

"You hear the doorbell ring," Julie said, describing the hardship a visit would cause. "You go to the door. You say, "Door," loud enough to be heard in other rooms. You unlock the door, open it, find out the neighbor wants a cup of sugar. You tell her, "Just a minute." You shut the door, lock it, go to the kitchen, get the sugar, come back to the door, say "Door," unlock it, open it, give her the cup of sugar and say, "I'm sorry, you can't come in."

"If you go outside to talk, you have to lock the door on your way out. Then, when you want to get back in, you have to ring the doorbell, and then somebody else has to come to the door and say "Door" to let you in."

On March 30, 1986, Julie Kulek didn't say "door" whenever she was about to open her door. On March 30, there was no need to shout any kind of warning because her house wasn't yet filled with young men who might run away the first chance they got.

Then, on March 31, the Kuleks" youngest child, Paul, entered a drug rehabilitation program called Straight, and overnight everything changed.

Several months later, as Julie found herself living in a home filled each evening with youngsters who spent their days at Straight and then came to the Kuleks" to sleep, these were among her memories of how her life used to be:

Going out.

Having friends over.

Spending time alone with her husband Bill.

Having more than a few moments a day to herself before she dropped off to sleep, exhausted.

"People don't believe this," she said of what her life had become. "Nobody has any concept of what really goes on in our house.

"I had one boy in my house they wanted to test for AIDS because they thought he had a mixed sexual background. I've had kids who had shot up every day, kids who have gotten drugs in exchange for sex, kids who have been in jail - not jail for kids but adult prisons."

All of them slept under her roof. At night, she would lock them and her son into his bedroom. In the morning, she would let them out and hug them as if she were their mother.

"Car thefts," she said, listing some of the crimes they had committed. "Armed robbery. Burglary. Arson."

Generations apart

Thirty years ago, in what now seems like a different time entirely, Julie Kulek was a teen-ager. She attended a Catholic high school in Detroit. She wore her hair long. She had a poodle skirt in her closet.

She never, never drank.

Forty years ago, Bill Kulek was a teen-ager, also in Detroit. He did drink. Every few weeks, he and a dozen of his friends would get a couple of cases of beer, head for the woods of Michigan and drink until every beer was gone. One time, when he was 16, he came home so drunk he threw up right in front of his father, who promptly made him gulp down a shot of whiskey that only made him sicker.

His father, an immigrant who worked for Chrysler, was a drinker, too. Every night before dinner, he'd have a shot or two to pave the way for the coming meal. He could control his drinking, though. Bill couldn't.

In his 20s, he began putting away six-packs of beer as if they were so much water. In his 30s, he was drinking a fifth of whiskey a day. In his 40s, he was still drinking that much when he met Julie.

They met in 1973. Both had been married. Both had had children. They dated for a year-and-a-half, got married and adopted each other's children, and in 1977 they moved to Tampa, settling into a house near the Hillsborough River.

Ten years later, the house has become a cozy, cluttered place that smells pleasantly of coffee and bacon, a middle-class home all the way. There is wood paneling in the den. There are bowling balls in the front closet. There is a dog.

Nowhere, though, is there any liquor. On his own, Bill admitted to himself he was an alcoholic and brought his addiction under control soon after he and Julie were married. No longer does he drink, except for an occasional beer after bowling. Julie, never more than a social drinker, might order a sloe-gin-and-7-Up on the rare night she and Bill get to go out, but that's it.

Neither drinks at home. Neither gets drunk under any circumstance. Because of Bill's history, both are aware of how troubling an addiction can be and how early it can take root.

Yet when it comes to Paul, the dependency he developed on marijuana and pills and cocaine seems unfathomable to them. They weren't teen-agers so long ago that they've forgotten the peer pressure that comes with the age; still, they say, the pressure on a teen-ager today must be a thousand times worse than it was in their time.

"Nobody pressured me to drink, and nobody rejected me because I didn't," Julie says.

"Let's face it," says Bill. "When I was growing up, everybody was poor, so you didn't know you were poor. You had to use your imagination. Now it's all material. I can buy blue jeans for 10 or 15 bucks, Paul wants ones that cost 27. I buy sneakers for \$12, he wants Nikes."

Paul wanted them - and Paul got them. He got the Nikes and the \$27 jeans, and when those wore out, he got fresh ones. And a skateboard. And a \$250 bike. And a computer. And tickets to the tractor pull ("Paul wanted to go," says Julie. "We were the first ones in line for tickets.>").

Bill and Julie wanted to be good parents to Paul, and they thought they were.

Only later, after he was enrolled in Straight, were they told that their behavior had probably contributed to Paul's problems. They were told that instead of being encouraging, they were being manipulated; that instead of being understanding, they were being pushovers.

"Giving in," Julie said, explaining the lesson. "Doing for."

"Not following through," said Bill.

"Enabling," Straight called it. They were enabling Paul to destroy himself.

Demands of the program

That lesson came later. Their first lesson, as painful in its own

way, was that Straight doesn't come cheap, and in many cases - including theirs - insurance covers none of the expenses.

Just walking in the door to have Paul admitted cost the Kuleks \$1,089; two weeks later came a \$1,600 evaluation fee; then came a monthly charge of \$350 (raised to \$385 this year) that would continue until Paul left the program.

On top of that there were other expenses. Gas money for driving 80 miles to and from Straight each day. A \$2 donation the Kuleks would give weekly during parents' meetings when a contribution basket was passed around. A \$25 donation for a commercial about Straight to be aired during a TV program on drug abuse. And more.

To a middle-class family just making ends meet anyway, the financial demands of Straight were hard enough; the Kuleks had to dip deep into their savings. To Bill Kulek, though, far harder were the other demands the program makes on parents of its clients, demands that would soon turn the Kuleks' life completely around.

"I think the hardest part has got to be the time involved," Bill said. "It seems you're just going from one thing to the next. You're never relaxed."

All of this began the day he and Julie dropped Paul off at the program. Paul went in, and they went home - and that evening they were back again for a parents' meeting. "This program is not only for them, it's for you, too," the discussion leader told the Kuleks as he handed them a list of rules.

Bill flipped through them. They totaled nine pages. Among them:

"Attendance at Open meetings (every Monday and Friday night) is mandatory for all parents."

"Siblings (8 and up) are to attend Saturday Sibling Rap 10-12 noon and Friday night raps, except when excused."

"Both parents must be in the home each night that the child is on First and Second Phase. In cases of emergency, these parents may submit travel plans and Staff may approve or deny this travel."

"Overnight business travel will be considered for parents with a child on Third, Fourth (or) Fifth Phase. Plans for such travel must be submitted to Staff for approval."

"Vacation is permitted for families on Fifth Phase only. Staff approval of vacation plans is required."

Silently, the Kuleks listened as they were told it wasn't just Paul who was in need of help, but their entire family. By the time they headed out to the parking lot and their car, it was after dark. Bill, exhausted, lit a cigarette. So did Julie.

"Mom!" they heard someone call.

It was Paul. He was on the other side of the parking lot, waiting for a ride to the home of another young man in the program. He was being held by one of his belt loops.

"Dad!"

Bill and Julie knew they weren't supposed to have any contact with their son for several weeks. They weren't supposed to talk with him. They weren't even supposed to see him.

"Mom!"

But instincts took over. Julie, recognizing the voice, turned to look at her son. For a moment, Bill did, too, but then he reached for Julie, gently turned her away and steered her toward their car.

"Mom!"

They got in. They shut the doors and drove off.

By the time they got home, it was after 10 p.m. That was on a Monday. The following Friday, they were back again for a second parents' meeting, this time not getting home until almost midnight. The following Monday they were back again, and then Friday, and then Monday, and so it went, week after week.

They gave up their bowling league.

They sold their camper.

"I figured it was going to be two months and that's it," Bill said at one point. "Now I know that's impossible."

They began volunteering to work at the bingo game that Straight runs weekly to raise money.

Julie began going directly from her part-time bookkeeping job to Straight to be a "Runner Mom," which meant doing anything from addressing envelopes to going on errands.

They went to open meetings and learned to say "Love you" while hugging other parents.

And after the father of one young man in Straight sidled up to them one evening and said, "I didn't see you at the parents' weekend," they went to the next one on the schedule.

It was held in a church in downtown St. Petersburg. For two days, most of the parents of children in Straight had to act as if they, themselves, were enrolled in the program. They were led around by their belt loops. Julie couldn't wear makeup or jewelry. No one could smoke. They took part in "rap sessions," emotional discussions during which couples broke down as they talked about how miserable their lives had become and ended up in clinging embraces. "You'd be surprised what it did for some couples," Julie said, after it was over.

For her, one of the tougher parts was eating lunch. She made a peanut butter and raspberry jelly sandwich. She spent all morning looking forward to it. Then, Straight officials exchanged the lunches everyone had brought, and while she watched someone else enjoying the sandwich she had so carefully made, she ended up with another parent's concoction - plain old peanut butter on plain old bread, no jelly, dry and thin.

Opening their home

Then things really got difficult.

Fifty days after Paul entered the program, he was promoted to Second Phase, which meant he could begin sleeping at home instead of spending his evenings in the homes of other young men in Straight.

That's when the Kuleks became what Straight calls a "host home." That's when other young men in the program began spending their nights with the Kuleks.

At first, Julie resisted. "When I was first told I was going to be a host home, I said, 'No way I'm going to have a house full of druggies.'"

"But they said, 'What'd you have before?'"

So each evening, the Kulek house became home to three or four troubled young strangers. The robbers. The burglars. The arsonist.

Often, they came to the house right after being checked into the program, which meant they were usually high and often drunk. Some nights, Julie would be up past midnight listening to them pour their hearts out. One night, she had to help break up a fistfight. Yet eventually, she said, she realized all of the young men had their good sides: "These kids, no matter how rebellious they are, they're grateful that you would even take them in."

That realization, though, came later. First came profound changes in the way the Kulek household operated, changes based on the burden of having as many as five extra people under one roof and the concern that one of them might try to run away or hurt himself.

Doors were closed and bolted.

All sharp knives and scissors were locked in a toolbox and kept in a back room. "I go out back and get the knife, use it, wash it and put it back," Julie said, describing the process of slicing up tomatoes for a salad. "We don't even put it in the dishwasher."

Breakable drinking glasses were replaced by plastic cups; breakable

plates were replaced by paper ones.

Shampoo use had to be monitored because at another host home, a young woman had tried to make herself sick by drinking a bottle of it.

Visitors - including the fiance of Paul's older sister Jodie - weren't allowed in the house at night.

Loads of dirty clothes began piling up so quickly, Julie found herself doing a load a day. Electric bills went up. So did water bills. And grocery bills. And other bills. "We've worn out I don't know how many towels," Julie said.

And, of course, everyone began saying "door" when opening the door. "I have gone to the door when nobody's at home and yelled, 'Door,'" Julie said. "I'm sure the pizza man must think we're crazy."

"Sleep, work and Straight," Bill said, describing what life had become. "I didn't think it would be as tough as it's been."

"There's times when I'm tired, I don't want to be bothered, I just want to do my own thing," Julie said. "But when you see all the changes in the kids . . ."

Always, that's what Bill and Julie would find themselves thinking about. The changes. Every time they would begin thinking how disrupted their lives had become, they would remind themselves of how bad it had been when Paul was taking drugs. The fights. The screaming. The slammed doors. The tension.

"I've had people say, 'How can you do this?' and I say, 'It may take a year of my life, but it's giving my kid his life back,'" Julie said.

"You change if it's going to help your kid out," Bill said. "It's to help all of us, really."

A "better" family

Out of this chaos, then, a troubled family began healing. Paul got better, and so did Bill and Julie. Paul got nicer, and they did, too.

They became a better family. Not perfect: Jodie, Paul's older sister, often felt slighted by the amount of attention Paul was getting from her parents. "If Paul has a problem, they hurry up and sit down and talk about it. If I have a problem, they don't," she said at one point. "One night we got into a big argument, and I said, 'Just because I'm not in Straight doesn't mean I can't express myself,' and my father said, 'Why don't you be quiet - you'll upset everybody,' and I said, 'My God, I might upset someone from Straight ...' "

Not perfect - but better.

"I've learned to listen," said Bill.

"I think we all had a lack of communication," said Julie. "We yelled at Paul, or he yelled at us. Bill and I yelled at each other, we'd have fights. Now, we talk a lot more. We've all learned to communicate better."

"The best thing," said Jodie, who is a year older than Paul, "is I have my brother back."

So it was that on a night when Bill could have been bowling or watching TV or - in the old days - down drinking shots at the bar, he went with his son to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, one of two such meetings Paul was required to attend each week.

Paul was the youngest person there, but he wasn't at all inhibited: When called on to speak, he talked at length about how both drinking and drug use had affected him. "I'm Paul," he began, "and I'm an alcoholic and an addict."

Then Bill was called on to speak. It was his first time ever at a meeting like this. Even when he was quitting drinking, he had never gone to one. He looked around the room at the lined faces and the tired eyes. He looked at the man who had said drinking had ruined his marriage and at the woman who had said her drinking caused her to

abandon her child. He looked at his son, so young looking, in the midst of all of them.

He cleared his throat and said, "I'm Bill, and I'm . . . the father of an alcoholic and an addict."

Paul said nothing.

Later, though, back at home, when Julie asked how the meeting had gone, he said, "Mom, don't you think Dad should have said he was an alcoholic?"

They were all in the kitchen. Bill sat at the table. Paul came up behind him.

"What'd he say?" Julie asked.

"He said he was the father of an alcoholic," Paul said.

Julie glanced toward her husband. He had come a long way since the day they had met. He had brought his drinking under control. He had learned to say, "I love you," to his son. His hair was beginning to recede and the wrinkles were growing deeper around his eyes, but he had been there for her and Paul all along. He had been thrilled when, a few weeks earlier, Paul had begun kissing him goodnight.

"Maybe you can get him to say it next time," Julie said to her son.

Paul shrugged and said nothing more about it. He began cleaning some dirty dishes while Bill lit a cigarette and Julie poured herself a cup of coffee. For the moment, it was quiet in the house.

Another day was drawing to a close.

Paul went off to get ready for bed. This night there were three young men staying with the Kuleks, and they followed him toward his room.

Of the three, one was from out of town and was staying with the Kuleks even though he was well into the program's upper phases. The other two were just beginning, which meant that if they had to go to the bathroom, Paul would have to go with them to make sure they didn't try to climb out a window. Then, in the morning, if Paul wanted to take a shower, they would have to stand outside the tub with arms draped over the curtain rod so Paul would know they weren't running off.

From down the hall, Julie could hear the sounds of Paul lifting mattresses, checking his room for any drugs the other young men might have tried to sneak in. She sipped her coffee. In a few minutes, she would have to go lock them in for the night.

A bit weary, she leaned against the refrigerator door where a list of house rules was posted:

Beds made in the morning.

Oldcomers get 7-minute showers, newcomers get 5 minutes.

Fifty pushups if "F" word is used.

"It's going to be so weird to lead a normal life," she said, thinking about the day when all of this would end.

Next: Relapse

The rules of Straight

After a child enters Straight, one of the first things his or her parents receive is a list of rules governing their behavior while their child is in the program. When the Kuleks had Paul admitted, they received a list of rules nine pages long. Since then, the rules have been rewritten and reduced to six pages. Among them:

Parent Group Sessions and Open Meetings for all parents are every Monday and Friday at 6:15 p.m. during phases one, two and three; every Monday and Friday as assigned during phases four and five.

During phases one, two, three and four, clients are not to leave the house or stop anywhere going to and from the program. First and Second Phasers may not receive telephone calls, letters, cards or gifts.

Parents should check before Open Meeting to see if their child has a "Want List," i.e., a list of items he/she needs, such as toothpaste,

deodorant, socks, etc. All clothing and personal articles must have the client's name on them.

Parents are not to call Staff in reference to their child's progress. Staff will provide (periodic) progress reports.

No guests or visitors of the client to Open Meeting until the client is on Third Phase without Professional Staff permission. Call 48 hours ahead for permission.

Parents and guests are asked not to enter the lobby dressed in shorts, bathing suits, midriffs, tank tops or tennis dresses.

Both parents must be in the home each night that the child is on First and Second Phase. In cases of emergency, these parents may submit travel plans and Staff may approve or deny this travel.

One day business travel - leaving home in the a.m. and arriving back at home same day in p.m. - will be allowed. Staff must be notified of travel plans so that parents may be contacted in case of emergency.

Vacation is permitted for families on Fifth Phase only.

Bring: spiral notebook; four pairs of pants; shoes; socks; jacket or sweater; five shirts; underwear; pajamas; robe; toothbrush; toothpaste; shaving equipment (disposable razors only); shaving cream (no aerosol); deodorant (no aerosol, plastic containers); comb; brush; shampoo (plastic container); personal hygiene items (no plastic tampons).

Do not bring: food; candy; gum; razor blades; magazines; books; cameras; tape recorders; radios; letters; photos; stuffed animals; shirts with drug-culture emblems; knives; sporting goods. Also: Do not put any type of medications in suitcase, please give it to the receptionist at the front desk.

SC: NATIONAL

PG: 1A

AT: drug health lifestyle change family

SU: Paul Kulek; Bill Kulek; Julie Kulek

TY: SERIES

CR: COLOR PHOTO, Eric Mencher; BLACK AND WHITE

PHOTO, Eric Mencher, (2); BLACK AND WHITE CHART, (2)

CU: Julie and Bill Kulek: "The hardest part has got to be the time involved;" The Kuleks in their den: Pleasant, cozy, a middle-class home all the way; Paul's sister Jodie, 18, says, "I have my brother back;" The rules of Straight, in a box, which is appended; A box explaining about the series, which appeared previously.

ED: CITY

St. Petersburg Times

Publication Date: 5/6/87

Page: 1A

HD: Going Straight // Part 4: A young man falls apart

BY: DAVID FINKEL

SE: Going Straight

EX: Part 4: A young man falls apart

The worst week in the life of 16-year-old Paul Kulek began when he opened the front door of his house.

It was almost 10 p.m. on Aug. 18, 1986, a quiet Monday night in the suburbs of north Tampa. Paul's father was in the kitchen, eating a late dinner at the formica-topped dinette, glancing at the paper. His mother was out walking the dog. She was only a minute or two down the street, probably nearing the corner, when Paul came down the carpeted hallway and eased the front door open.

He shouldn't have been anywhere near the door. He should have been back in his bedroom where his mother had left him, door closed, light on. He stepped outside and edged along the side of his house, away from the street lamps. He moved in shadows and cut over to a neighbor's yard. For a moment, he wondered if he was being foolish, if he could make it unnoticed back to his room, but then he cut through another yard, emerged on an adjacent street and started to run.

His mother, Julie, was gone 10 minutes at the most. When she came back and saw the front door open, she knew something was wrong.

"Paul?" she called. Her husband, Bill, came out of the kitchen.

"Paul?" she called again, louder.

She and Bill hurried up the hall to Paul's room, listening hard for him, alarm taking root, hoping he was only hiding. They looked in the bathroom - empty - in the den - empty - all through the house, in the front yard, in the back yard, in the bushes, up and down the street.

Full panic took hold now. Bill got in his pickup truck and began driving the neighborhood. Julie and Paul's sister, Jodie, got in another car and drove to the Farm Store, to the Circle K, to the Amoco, showing around a photo of a smiling boy with brown hair and baby skin. No one had seen him.

They called the police. Midnight came and went. They sat and waited for a phone call, or, better, for Paul to walk back in, to hug them, to hang his head and say he couldn't run away after all, that he loved them too much. Three a.m. came and went. Bill fidgeted. Jodie cried. Julie was quiet. Her mind, though, was busy.

With unnerving clarity, she saw her son as he had been a few months before: sitting around with his friends, smoking pot, sniffing cocaine, mean, defiant, high to the point of dizziness, his eyes shiny, his cheeks sunken, so skinny his ribs showed.

"Just looking very unhappy."

A perplexing act

The thing is, he had been doing so well. One hundred-forty days into a drug rehabilitation program called Straight, Paul had changed from a sullen, bristling young man into someone who paid attention, who smiled easily, who hugged his parents every night before bed and said, "I love you."

In Straight, one of the largest - and most controversial - drug programs in the country, such changes are part of how success is



defined. Undoubtedly in some cases, the changes are contrived; one of the first things a person new to Straight realizes is that the best way to get out of the program is to go along with it.

But in Paul's case, the program truly seemed to be working wonders.

For instance, to be called on to speak in Straight, a person has to show he wants to speak more than anyone else. The way this is done is by putting a hand in the air - not just lazily holding it up, but stabbing it up and down, waving it back and forth, pumping it like a piston. Paul learned to do this and more. He would wave his hand so hard that his chair would creak, his bones would crack, his fingers would snap. Sometimes, he would propel himself right out of his seat.

He was the same way when called on to talk. If he was depressed, he would let the tears flow, even though dozens of other teen-agers were watching. If he was happy, people could float along on his smile, it was so big.

All of this, then, made his running away that much more perplexing.

He had come so far. He had completed the first phase of the program, probably the worst time of all, a time of mandatory abstinence from home, parents, friends, TV and music.

He had completed Second Phase, which meant he was allowed to return home at night to sleep.

He had completed Third Phase, which meant a return to a special school at Straight.

He had been elevated to Fourth Phase, which meant having three days off from the program every week. He had only one more phase to go, a few months at the most.

"He's doing so well," Julie said proudly one afternoon. That night, he ran.

Out of control

Fifteen hours went by before Paul phoned home. Julie answered and breathed a sigh of relief when she heard her son's voice.

It was immediately clear to her, though, that whatever had driven Paul away was still in his mind. He sounded upset and on edge. He said he had been up all night. He offered no explanation for running, other than to say things had gotten to be too much.

He said that he had smoked cigarettes, that he had been offered drugs, that he had turned them down, that he was safe, that he was sorry, that he was coming home.

"You're going to have to go back into the program," Julie told him.

"Well, maybe I don't need it," Paul said.

"Well, I think you do," Julie said.

He came home. Late that afternoon, Paul, Bill and Julie returned to Straight. It was a tense return, however; even as they walked in the front door, Paul and Bill were fighting over whether Paul could bring cigarettes inside.

"You can't," Bill said.

"Go to hell," Paul said.

Less than a day had gone by, but everything had changed; the faces were proof. Paul's glow had turned into belligerence. Bill looked furious. And Julie looked devastated as she watched her son sign himself back into the program.

"Paul, glad to see you back, buddy," said the staff member who watched him sign in. "I'm proud of you."

"Yeah," Paul said.

"What drugs did you do?"

"Smoked cigarettes," Paul said. "Will I be able to eat something?"

He was taken to a bathroom to give a urine sample that could be tested for drugs (it was clean except for nicotine). He was taken from

there through a series of halls until he came to a huge room in the very back of the building. There, deep in the afternoon discussion, were the others in Straight, the other young men and women he had left behind.

Paul stood and watched a moment. He was led to a seat in the second row, on the aisle. A few people hugged him. One person patted him on the back.

"Don't do that," he said sharply.

He leaned forward and rested his head on the chair in front of him.

"Glad to see you back, Paul," said a young man in front of the group, a recent graduate of the program who was helping lead the afternoon discussion.

"Thanks," Paul said without lifting his head. His tone was mocking. The young man who had patted him on the back patted him again, this time harder.

"Don't," Paul said.

"Paul, why don't you settle down," the leader suggested. "The whole group knows you're back. Group, do you know Paul's back?"

Everyone in the room raised a hand in the air and looked at Paul, who looked back at them angrily. One young man came over to talk to him, but when Paul saw him, he stood up and began to run.

Immediately, chairs scraped back, and people jumped for him to keep him from getting away. Someone grabbed him around the waist, and Paul started to swing.

He was tackled by five or six young men, who pushed him backward onto the concrete floor. He strained against them to get up, but they were too much for him. He tensed so tightly he turned crimson. He began crying. He began spitting in their faces. "Shhhh," someone said to him, leaning close, trying to soothe him, but he was out of control.

Pinned on the floor, he growled like an animal. He spit at blurred faces and gasped for air as if he were being choked. He tensed so hard he began to quiver, and finally he let loose a sickening roar that echoed so loudly, staff members came running from every part of the building.

"Face forward! Let's have a song!" one of them yelled to the group, trying to divert attention from the pitiful spectacle of a young man falling apart.

Amazingly, everyone began to sing a song they had been taught about Straight, loudly and in unison. But even when their voices swelled, it wasn't enough to completely distract them from Paul as he continued to struggle in the back of the room, screaming, then just crying, then just shaking, then just breathing hard.

"Why'd you change?"

At Straight, where the pressures on a person can sometimes seem suffocating, behavior such as Paul's isn't common, but neither is it unheard of. This isn't a program for obedient and well-mannered children, after all, but for young, drug-dependent people who know how to taunt and how to fight.

Few enroll in the program voluntarily. Most are forced in by their parents, and some are there by court order, as a last chance before being sent to jail. On any given day, chairs might get thrown, people might get punched. And at some point, almost everyone in the program tries to run.

Of those who do run, most sink back into drug use as soon as they get the chance. Some just flirt with it to remind themselves of how it was, others stay with it. Some are gone from the program only a few hours, others don't come back.

In Paul's case, the theories to explain his behavior were many: He was especially immature for his age; he needed special attention; he was fed up with the incessant demands of the program. His only hint was

what he had said to his mother on the phone, that everything had simply gotten to be too much.

Surely there were deeper reasons, but whatever they were, they stayed hidden within him; meanwhile, he got worse.

He found a paper clip on the floor and began making scratches along the soft underside of his left forearm.

"What happened to your arm?" a staff member asked him.

"I cut it. Not bad," Paul said.

"Did it do what you wanted?"

"Yeah. It got the feelings out. They escaped right out."

He smiled. Later, though, he found a small piece of glass on the floor and began scratching the tops of his fingers until they bled.

Four days after his return to the program, Straight officials began wondering whether Paul was simply hurting himself for attention or whether there were deeper problems involved. His arms and fingers were a mess. He had been restrained several times each day for fighting, and once, when taken to a room to cool off, he had ripped out part of the ceiling.

Charles Larsen, a clinical psychologist employed at the time as Straight-Tampa Bay's associate director, wanted Paul taken to a hospital for psychiatric observation. "What Paul is experiencing is ambivalence," he explained. "On one hand, he knows he needs to be in the program, he knows he's chemically dependent. On the other hand, it's mighty appealing to be out there and have your freedom. What it does is tear you in half."

But Steve Knowles, the program's director, disagreed. "Paul," he said, "is suffering from two diseases: chemical dependency and adolescence." He decided to give Paul one more chance at that night's open meeting, the one time each week when all the people in Straight meet face-to-face with their parents in a giant assembly.

Paul was placed in the very back row, almost hidden from view. He watched as his parents and sister filed in with the others. When their turn came to speak, they stood, but he stayed in his seat.

"Paul, stand up, please," Bill said into a microphone that had been passed to him so that Paul and everyone else in the room could hear what he had to say.

Paul stayed seated.

Bill waited for him to stand. "You're just making an ass of yourself," he said.

Paul shook his head.

"Yes you are," Bill said quietly and passed the microphone to Julie.

Trembling a bit, she said, "We realize you're hurting, and we are, too. We love and support you and hope you can do it." Paul still didn't stand, but the smirk on his face disappeared.

Jodie took the microphone. "Paul, you were so strong," she said, starting to cry. "Why'd you change?" She began crying too hard to go on, and suddenly Paul pushed back his chair and ran.

Again, he was grabbed. Again, he was tackled. But this time, instead of being restrained on the floor, he was carried kicking and screaming from the room while a hundred people looked on, including Bill, who stared in disgust, and Julie, who put a hand to her mouth until she finally closed her eyes.

A call to police

This is what happened next:

Paul was carried to a far hallway and placed on his back on the floor.

Bill and Julie were brought to see him.

Bill knelt and held his son's face in his hands.

Paul looked in his father's eyes and said, "You f---ing

son-of-a-b----."

Bill said, "I still love you, Paul," and walked away.

Charles Larsen called Bill and Julie into his office and told them that Paul should be taken to a hospital for observation.

Julie, afraid of this, said, "Will this alienate us from him?"

Bill said, "It doesn't matter. We've got no choice."

Larsen said, "Do you want to take him in your car or do you think the police need to take him?"

Julie said, "Could I just talk to him first? I just think I could get through to him."

Larsen, not wanting to wait any longer, phoned the Pinellas Park police and said a young man at Straight needed to be transported to Morton Plant Hospital in Clearwater.

Julie said, "He's listened to me, always. When he's high. When he's not high."

Larsen said, "I'm sorry."

The police came and handcuffed Paul.

Julie wept so hard it seemed her grief would never reach bottom.

Paul was taken away.

Bill and Julie followed.

"I want to start new"

That should have been it. Paul was gone; so long, Paul. The group, no doubt, would survive just fine without him.

Yet three days after he was taken away, he was back again, standing before the group, asking for forgiveness.

In the hospital, nothing much had happened to him. He had calmed down. He had drawn a few pictures for a psychiatrist. He had talked to the psychiatrist, who said he was fine. Most importantly, he had been given time alone to put things in perspective, to balance the hardships of Straight against the sadness and dullness that previously had been defining his life.

One more try, he decided, might be a blessing.

So he was back, a subdued young man. He stood before the group with a sense of uncertainty, the surliness gone, replaced, it seemed, by doubt. Head down, voice quiet, hands jammed in pockets, he tried to explain how he was feeling. "It's real scary coming back again," he said. "I feel like people are going to hold grudges against me because of what I did. Now that I'm back, I'm just real scared about what people are thinking, that I'm crazy."

"I don't want you to worry about that," a group leader said to him. "People are damn glad to see you back."

"I get this rage inside me," Paul went on. "I don't know how to deal with it. I don't know what to do sometimes. I tell myself I'm going to sit here and make it, but then I get thoughts about just running for the door and getting out of here. I become embarrassed about these thoughts. I feel like I'm crazy or something. I guess that's why I was sent there to Morton Plant, because I have these kinds of thoughts. I was talking to the doctor there, he said, 'You need to work on these thoughts.' But I don't know how to deal with them."

"You're not crazy," a young woman in the program said. "You're a good person. I support you a lot. I care about you a lot, and I'm glad you're back."

"I'm feeling real depressed over what I did," Paul said. "I screwed a lot of people over. I want to stay away from how I was feeling. I want to start all over. I want to start new."

He took a seat and drew a breath. Deeper explanations would come later, but for the moment, he seemed a relieved young man.

"We love you, Paul," the group said in unison. Several people came over and patted him on the back. This time, he smiled. Everyone put a hand in the air to be called on to talk, and he did, too. At

first he just held it there, but soon he was waving it back and forth, stabbing it up and down, pumping it like a piston. His chair creaked. His bones cracked. His fingers snapped. The worst week in his life was over.

Onto better times. Onto Day No. 148.

Next: A final attempt

A daily report

Each evening, all clients in Straight are required to write a "Moral Inventory," or "MI," in which they summarize their day, emphasize any good points from all that went on and set goals for the following days and weeks. This is the MI Paul Kulek wrote after his 37th day in Straight:

Challenge: This morning I was in a good mood when we got to the building. I felt like sharing feelings on misbehaving but I didn't (get called on) so I kept it in all day and I started to f--- around during morning rap and I fell into my pity and I hyperventilated and staff caught me and asked me why I was doing that and I said because I am frustrated and looking for a buzz. So after the person was done talking staff called on me and I started talking about missing my past and how I feel lonely and they said that a lot of people care about me and that when I told the group what I did I was embarrassed but I shared a lot of feeling about it and I got a little bit resolved. For the rest of the day I would do little s--- like talk out to newcomers and not motivate. But I didn't misbehave and I am doing pretty good except I am kind of sitting in my s---.

Good points: That I am setting an example with other newcomers. I am working and learning my new program. That I am caring more about people. That I shared feelings on how I didn't have friends in my past. And that I am 37 days straight.

Goals: I would like to talk to (another young man in the program) about my feelings toward misbehaving and how I feel about hyperventilating. I would like to go into group and talk about how I feel about maybe having to leave my host home.

Blessing: Dear God, please bless my mom, dad, sister, brother and the rest of the people I know.

About the series

This series was begun 16 months ago when officials of Straight, responding to a request from the St. Petersburg Times, consented to allow a Times reporter to follow a person through its drug-rehabilitation program. Among the conditions agreed to by Straight were these:

The Times would choose the person to follow.

The Times would have unrestricted access to the person.

The Times would be able to follow the person's progress from the moment he first entered the program.

Times reporter David Finkel sat in on several admission interviews before Paul Kulek and his family were chosen on March 31, 1986, to be the subjects of the series. While keeping continual track of Paul's progress, the Times decided not to publish any stories in the series until he had left the program so as not to interfere with his chances for success.

SC: NATIONAL

PG: 1A

AT: juvenile drug profile

SU: Straight Incorporated

TY: SERIES

CR: COLOR PHOTO, Eric Mencher; COLOR PHOTO, Cherie

Diez; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, Cherie Diez

CU: Paul Kulek; Several times a day, clients in Straight put their

arms around each other to show unity; To be called on to speak in Straight, a person has to show he wants to speak more than anyone else.

ED: CITY

St. Petersburg Times

Publication Date: 5/7/87

Page: 1A

HD: Going Straight // Part 5: After 376 days, "I made it"  
BY: DAVID FINKEL  
SE: GOING STRAIGHT  
EX: Last in a series

On the day before his 16th birthday, Paul Kulek got a card with a letter tucked inside. "'Dear Paul,'" it began.

It was from his mother. He knew it as soon as he saw the writing. Something about a mother's handwriting - it was as familiar to him as his own.

She wrote: "'Sixteen years ago today, I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. The moment I saw you, I loved you with all my heart ...'"

She had written him a lot of little notes over the years: notes on birthday cards, notes for school. Never, though, had she written him a letter like this.

"'Maybe I didn't always make the best choices, but hopefully you forgave me and I learned from my mistakes. I hope this time I made the right decision and that in time you will see it too. After sixteen years of loving you and watching you grow, I don't want to lose you ...'"

He started to cry.

"'If you are angry when you read this, please remember this birthday can be the beginning of a whole new life for you and those who really love you and care for you. We feel this is the best gift we could give you - our love. All my love, Mom.'"

She was right. He was angry at her. It was April 1, 1986, one day after he had been put into a drug rehabilitation program called Straight. He felt trapped. He felt betrayed. He felt furious. But when he was done reading the letter, he folded it carefully and kept it nearby as he slept.

The next day he read it again, and the following day again. It was with him as he went through endless counseling sessions. It was with him as weeks in Straight turned into months. And though ripped in places from folding and unfolding, it was still with him a year later, on the night of April 10, 1987, when his mother hugged him tightly, smiled with relief and whispered to him, "'I love you.'"

A remorseful return

He made it. Three hundred seventy-six days after the start of his rehabilitation, Paul Kulek became one of the success stories of Straight. You could see it in his eyes. They were bright. You could see it in his face, which beamed. A year after entering the program, he was free of drugs and hopeful of staying that way.

"'Some people do it on their own, some people do it with short-term programs, some people do it with long-term programs,'" he said. "'I did it this way, and I made it.'"

"'This way'" was Straight's way, a program as long-term as they come. Month after month in Straight, a young person's self-concept is torn down as low as it can go and then rebuilt through intensive peer counseling. It is a wearying program, agonizing and tearful. Paul made it. But he almost didn't.

From his first day in, he was a sullen and troubled young man, and

after several months he simply fell apart. There had been signs it was coming. He had gotten into fistfights. He had found staples on the floor and used them to carve long scratches in the underside of his forearm. There was one stretch during which he settled down long enough to make some progress, but then he ran away from the program, explaining later that he needed to vanish for a while from its incessant demands.

He came back remorseful, but in fact he was no better. He fought and screamed and was sent off for psychiatric observation. He returned remorseful again, but soon he was back to his old ways. He taunted people. He threw things. So Straight officials, not knowing what else to do, sent him home.

That was in late August 1986, five months after Paul had first entered Straight. He went home gladly, but then it dawned on him that he was 16 years old and out of options. He had withdrawn from school to enter Straight; now he was on the verge of abandoning Straight as well.

He sprawled on the couch and watched TV. He fought with his mother Julie, who insisted on towing him along wherever she went. He fought with his father Bill, and his sister Jodie.

For three days he brooded, and then, realizing how badly things were disintegrating, he asked his mother to call Straight and see if they would give him yet another chance.

Maybe, Straight answered, saying the staff would need to discuss it. Call back later.

Three more days went by. Then, on Friday, Sept. 5, Straight said yes, he could come back, and the following morning, deerlike in his nervousness, Paul returned.

He was put back on First Phase, as if he were entering the program for the first time. He was patted down. He was strip-searched. He gave a urine sample and swore in a signed statement that he wouldn't misbehave. He was led by his belt loop down a hallway and into the room where the others in Straight were gathered. "'Hi Paul,'" they yelled in unison. One young man hugged him, and then another one did, and then he sat down and put his hand in the air to be called on to talk.

To anyone watching who had seen him before, he seemed a different young man entirely. He began trying so hard to succeed that he seemed on the verge of bursting. It was as if his deciding to come back, rather than his parents' pressuring him to do so, had made all the difference in the world. "'I just made up my mind I wanted to complete the program,'" he would explain later. "'I got tired of the old ways.'"

There was no stopping him.

He got through First Phase in 21 days; his first time around it had taken 50.

He flew through Second Phase in eight days and, during one rap session, surprised more than a few people when the discussion turned to goals:

"'I always wanted to be a drug dealer,'" one boy said.

"'I always said I wanted to die high and in bed with a girl,'" said another.

"'One of my long-term goals,'" said a third, "'was to burn in hell or something. Another, I talked about going to Disney World and doing acid or something. Another was to stay high the rest of my life.'"

"'I got a long-term goal,'" Paul said. "'I want to be a staff member.'"

People looked closely to see if he was kidding. He wasn't.

In Third Phase, which took him 21 days to complete, he returned to "Straight school," a classroom within the building staffed by a Pinellas County teacher.

In Fourth Phase, which took him 94 days, he made plans to attend a vocational-technical school in Tampa.



Then came Fifth Phase and the start of his return to the real world. He had never been this far before.

He began attending vo-tech from morning until early afternoon, returning to Straight in time for the evening rap session. Straight continued to be a shelter for him, but his hours at school were something else. Kids would come back from lunch with beer on their breath or glassy-eyed from drugs, and he would see them and remember how it was for him.

Then, during a week-long vacation with his family in Detroit, he found himself at a hockey game, standing in line next to a man who was smoking some pot. The smoke drifted over and around him, thick and familiar. He moved away, but again, he couldn't help but remember.

Then, in bed one night, he had a dream.

"I saw myself getting high with other people. I saw myself sitting there smoking pot. It was like, This feels great! I knew what I was doing was wrong, though. Then, when I woke up, I didn't know if I had done it or not. I woke up and I thought I was high."

Half-asleep, he sat up in the dark, trying to get his bearings. Within seconds he realized it had just been a dream, but for those few moments, he was a petrified young man, afraid he had thrown away everything he had been working toward. He felt sick. Then relieved. Then sick again.

In early March, after he had been on Fifth Phase almost 50 days, he was accepted for staff training.

On April 2, 1987, he turned 17. He had been free from drugs for 368 days.

Eight days later, Straight officials decided the time had come for him to graduate.

The graduation

In drug rehabilitation, the most difficult thing to define is success.

"There are so many definitions of what success really is, I don't think anybody has a handle on it," says Harry Moffet, a program specialist with Florida's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.

"Success isn't clearly defined," agrees Matthew Glissen, founder of a Miami rehabilitation program called Village South. "Some of our most successful cases are the ones who didn't complete the program, and some of our most dismal failures are the ones who did."

"By no means," Glissen says, "should anyone equate the completion of a program with success."

At Straight, success is declared only when a person has remained free from drugs at least 12 months after he has left the program. The cutoff isn't arbitrary; during those 12 months, temptations return in force and willpower can easily break down. More than a few times since Paul entered the program, graduates of Straight came back for help, returning in far worse shape than they were in the first time they entered.

Technically, then, Paul wouldn't be a true success until he had completed a year of aftercare, including weekly meetings at Narcotics Anonymous. Yet looking at him on the evening of Friday, April 10, it was hard to think of him as anything else. By any standard, he was a changed young man. Straight doesn't work for everybody, but at that point it had worked for him.

He had kicked drugs. He had returned to school. He had gone from warring with his parents to arguing with them only occasionally. His face glowed so much it mesmerized.

"I would have been nothing," he said, thinking about how he might have ended up without treatment. "I know I would have been shooting up cocaine - one of my old druggie friends was doing it a week before I

went into the program, and if I was higher I think I would have done it, too. I would have been the same old Paul, getting high every day, doing drugs, nothing else."

Instead, he said, "I know myself now. I know how I am, what I need, what I want. I like myself a lot more. I basically have myself back."

Sitting in a blue chair near the others in the program, he watched the long line of parents begin filing in for the weekly Friday night meeting. Because he was in training to join the staff, he wore a tie, and his sneakers had been replaced by dress shoes.

He didn't know he would be graduating.

He knew he was close, but he didn't know when exactly it was going to happen. His parents did know, and they showed up for the meeting with five friends and relatives. Smiling, they walked in.

Paul saw them. And then he knew.

He watched them as they sat down. He grew teary. He fidgeted in his seat while the rest of the parents took their seats, and then, when his name was called out along with three other people who would be graduating that night as well, he rushed up to the front of the room with a smile that kept growing wider.

His family rushed up there, too, and when they got to him, they crowded around him in a knot.

They took turns embracing him. They took turns telling them how proud they were.

"I love you," his father said.

"I love you very much," his mother said.

"I never thought I'd make it," Paul said, laughing.

Holding onto each other, they began walking out while everyone else in the room - all the parents, all their children - applauded. Some of them cried, a mixture of happiness for the Kuleks and hope that they would make it, too. Several young men shook Paul's hand as he went by them, and one young man ran up and hugged him so hard, both of them almost tumbled to the floor. They laughed and slapped each other on the back, and Paul kept walking, turning around for one last look just as he got to the door.

He swept his eyes over the room, a room he knew as well as anything he had ever known in his life. He looked at the rows of blue plastic chairs where he had been sitting 10 hours a day, six days a week, for more than a year. He looked at the floor where he had been tackled when he tried to run away, and at the doors he had been trying to reach. He looked at the faces of the young people he was leaving behind.

Those faces - those were the most haunting thing of all.

From the day Paul entered the program until that moment, 233 people had been admitted to Straight, and in all of them there was a thread of continuity that was nothing short of amazing.

Like Paul, they had all come in scowling. Like him, they had sat in silence for a few days and then, tentatively, begun to talk. They had looked sheepish the first time they raised a hand into the air to be called on to speak, but then the sheepishness would disappear and their hands would become a blur. Smiles would creep in. Then tears. Then boredom. Then flatness. Then more tears. Then, if all went well, more smiles at the end.

On and on it went like this, month after month. Not everyone made it: Some left after a few days, some after a few weeks. Some left on their own, some were asked to leave. But empty chairs fill quickly at Straight, and the process continued on:

"This is Dan. He's done pot, alcohol, acid, mushrooms, cocaine, ups and downs."

"Love you, Dan ..."

"This is John. He's done pot, alcohol, inhalants, acid, cocaine,

prescriptions and PCP."

"Love you, John ..."

"This is Rick. He's done pot, alcohol, LSD, PCP, hash ..."

Each time, the face may have been slightly different from the one that preceded it - blond hair instead of brown, brown eyes instead of blue - but in one other way it was the same face again and again. It was always young.

Paul stepped through the door. He was 6 inches taller than he had been when he came into the program. He had gained 35 pounds.

Another person who had graduated rushed up to him. She was jumping up and down. She was crying. She grabbed onto him. She hugged him. She couldn't hold still.

"We're out!" she said.

"All right!"

Out.

It was cool. The sun was down. Palms rustled in the evening breeze.

Paul had a question:

Some people were going out for coffee and dessert. They were all graduates of the program. Could he go?

Julie looked at her son. Seventeen years and eight days before, he had come into the world pink and screaming, a healthy baby boy. Drowsily, she had cradled him in her arms, and then had listened happily as her doctor sang him a lullaby.

She had felt so much hope then.

And now, she felt so much hope again.

"What time will you be home?" she asked.

"Probably around 1," he said.

"All right," she said.

"All right!" he said.

He got in a car with two other people.

They rolled down the windows and turned on the radio.

They pulled out of the parking lot, laughing.

They made a right, speeded up and disappeared around a bend, one more carload of kids out on a Friday night.

About the series

This series was begun 16 months ago when officials of Straight, responding to a request from the St. Petersburg Times, consented to allow a Times reporter to follow a person through its drug-rehabilitation program. Among the conditions agreed to by Straight were these:

The Times would choose the person to follow.

The Times would have unrestricted access to the person.

The Times would be able to follow the person's progress from the moment he first entered the program.

Times reporter David Finkel sat in on several admission interviews before Paul Kulek and his family were chosen on March 31, 1986, to be the subjects of the series. While keeping continual track of Paul's progress, the Times decided not to publish any stories in the series until he had left the program so as not to interfere with his chances for success.

SC: NATIONAL

PG: 1A

AT: drug profile juvenile

SU: Straight Incorporated

TY: SERIES

CR: COLOR PHOTO, CHERIE DIEZ; BLACK AND WHITE

PHOTO, FRED VICTORIN, (2); BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO,

(2)

CU: Paul Kulek decides which of his former Straight classmates

may speak during rap session; Paul Kulek gets a kiss from his mother; Paul Kulek and his parents; Paul Kulek in 1986 when he was admitted into Straight Inc.; Paul Kulek in 1987 on graduation day from Straight Inc.  
ED: CITY

the driver lost control while turn- underside of the tank." ing on C...

3B St. Petersburg Times Saturday, June 24, 1989

## 2nd Straight center gets limited license

Associated Press

ORLANDO — The state has given the Straight Inc. drug rehabilitation center in Orlando a license for three months rather than a year, citing concerns that include methods used to restrain patients.

It was the second 90-day license for a Straight facility. The criticism of this center is similar to that given the group's Pinellas Park facility, which last week also received a three-month license renewal.

The state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) typically renews the licenses of drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs for a year.

HRS issued a report on both centers after routine actions.

The HRS report on the Orlando center, based on an inspection from May 31 to June 2, criticizes Straight's methods of restraining and monitoring patients and what it calls inconsistent record keeping.

"The program's policy on the restraint is a potential problem, both from a liability and clients' rights standpoint, with the possibility of serious injury when clients are encouraged and, or allowed to physically restrain other clients," the report states.

Linda Hedden, Straight's vice president for resource development, declined comment on the report saying officials have not read it.

Straight was founded by Mel Sembler, a Treasure Island developer who has been nominated U.S. ambassador to Australia by President Bush.

# Drug program to alter policies cited by HRS

By JOSHUA L. WEINSTEIN  
Times Staff Writer

July 21, 1989

ST. PETERSBURG — A drug and alcohol treatment program has called state concerns about some of its practices "irrelevant and naive," but has nonetheless taken action to change or clarify those practices.

The state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) in June denied Straight Inc. a full license renewal because of concerns about restraining methods, client privacy and records maintenance. Instead of granting a one-year license renewal, HRS granted an 90-day interim license.

Straight is appealing the HRS decision, said Page Peary, the program's vice president for operations. Until the appeal procedure is over though, Straight intends to comply with HRS investigators' recommendations.

"We want to get back into the business of helping kids now," Peary said Thursday. "We don't want any kind of cloak of an interim license."

In a July 17 letter to HRS, Straight asked the state to re-inspect its program Aug. 1. HRS had planned a re-inspection Aug. 22.

Treatment in the 13-year-old Straight program can last a year or more and relies heavily on peer pressure.

Despite a \$220,000 lawsuit by a young man who claimed Straight held him against his will for several months and criticism that the program uses brainwashing techniques, Straight has expanded to eight cities in addition to St. Petersburg and has been certified by the Joint Commission of Accredited Hospital Organizations.

Among the concerns raised by HRS were that Straight used clients to restrain other clients, that it did not provide clients privacy in the bathroom and that it did not permit clients free access to telephones if they wanted to call HRS.

Straight now has written policies specifying that clients are to be granted access to telephones should they wish to call HRS, that they should have privacy in the bathroom and that they are not to be restrained by other clients except in special circumstances.

But Peary took strong exception to one of the bathroom concerns:

"It was noted that clients complained of constipation and general aches and pains in Phase I (of the program) but were okay when moved to Phase II," a May 23 HRS report reads. Clients' constipation, the report reads, "may also relate to the practice of observing clients while they are in the bathroom."

That comment, Peary said, is naive.

"They're concerned about constipation on first phase and we're concerned about saving lives. . . . Their concerns about constipation and those processes is really the very example, the metaphor I'm trying to draw, that shows their evaluation is really irrelevant and naive."

Straight was founded by St. Petersburg developers Mel Sembler and Joe Zappala, now ambassadors-designate to Australia and Spain, respectively. Sembler is chairman of the board of Straight.

b6  
b7C

# Senate approves St. Pete's Zappala

By RAY LOCKER  
Tribune Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — Joseph Zappala, the St. Petersburg developer criticized by some Democrats as unqualified to represent the United States abroad, was confirmed by the Senate Tuesday as U.S. ambassador to Spain.

Zappala, 56, was approved by a 79-20 vote. Florida's senators, Republican Connie Mack and Democrat Bob Graham, voted for Zappala.

Democrats led by U.S. Sen. Paul Sarbanes of Maryland had said Zappala's appointment was solely a reward for giving President Bush and other Republican candidates \$128,000 during the last campaign.

But Senate Republicans said his business background made Zappala a good candidate.

"Why should a successful businessman be denied the opportunity to serve his country?" U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., asked. "There is no doubt in my mind that Joe Zappala is qualified to serve his country and his president."

Mack said it is up to Bush to name the ambassadors he wants, and Zappala was the right choice.

"I am confident Joe Zappala will do an outstanding job representing President Bush and our country as ambassador to Spain."

U.S. Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, acknowledged Zappala's lack of familiarity with the State Department but said Zappala knows the American way of life.

"I would rather have someone who understands our system, what we are all about, what we are trying to do, than have someone who knows all about the State Department," Gramm said.

Zappala is chairman of Joseph Zappala & Associates, a real estate development company, and has been called the "Grandfather of Condominiums" for his role in building the Gulf Coast condominium market.

Zappala also owns Home Town Investors Inc., which operates a large nursing home in St. Petersburg, and the Tucson Greyhound Park in Tucson, Ariz.

He moved to Florida to enter the real estate business after graduating from the New York Institute of Finance. He and wife, Carole, have four daughters.

Zappala has been publicity-shy, refusing interviews, since he was nominated for the ambassadorship. He could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

His nomination was approved by a narrow 10-9 vote in the Senate Foreign Relations in July after Sarbanes and committee Democrats led an effort to kill the nomination there.

But in the full Senate, the debate

was mild, despite an hour-long speech by Sarbanes Monday that dissected Zappala's record of political contributions and thin foreign policy resume.

He will fill the post left open since March, when former Ambassador Reginald Bartholomew was named assistant secretary of state.

Zappala's close friend and St. Petersburg business associate Melvin Sembler, also a generous GOP contributor, has been nominated as ambassador to Australia. Also like Zappala, he has been criticized for his lack of foreign policy experience.

A vote on Sembler's nomination has not been set.

Sarbanes, former diplomats and the American Foreign Service Association have criticized Bush's record of appointing too many political associates and contributors instead of career diplomats.

Since taking office, Bush has appointed 58 ambassadors to foreign countries. Of those, 36 have been political appointees, and 22, or 38 percent, have been career diplomats, according to State Department figures. Since 1961, no other president has appointed career officers to less than 61 percent of the ambassadorial openings.

# Ambassador from St. Pete gets on with job

By NEIL COTE  
Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Six months after arriving Down Under, the U.S. ambassador to Australia sees economic issues on the rise in global policy-making.

Melvin Sembler, the St. Petersburg businessman turned ambassador, has reason to be excited about this trend: His role of representing U.S. interests in Australia grows more important each day.

A former mall developer well-versed in international commerce, Sembler relishes a challenge and believes his impact is being felt in Canberra and Washington. Furthermore, Sembler says the business background that drew scorn during congressional confirmation hearings last year has since proved to be an asset.

"The issues today are focusing more and more on trade," says Sembler, who arrives in St. Petersburg this week for the first time since being dispatched to Canberra last fall. "As tensions ease around the globe, the focus falls on trade."

Already, Sembler's diplomatic skills have been tested by efforts to smooth economic controversies that threaten to cool the normally warm relations between the United States and Australia. The United States enjoys a \$4 billion trade surplus with the Australians and hopes to maintain it without disrupting Australia's economy and putting at risk bilateral defense agreements.

Once a protectionist nation, Australia is moving toward free trade, but believes the United States' agricultural policies are hurting its grain, beef and sugar industries. Sembler's role in the issue involves meeting with Australian industrialists and policy-makers, and trying to find common ground.

As Sembler explains, the role of an ambassador is to facilitate rather than create policy. He says he can best perform his duties by representing the American view and taking into consideration Australian concerns.

He prefers to keep issues separate, particularly trade and defense, the two most important connections between the United States and Australia.

Overall good relations between the two nations notwithstanding, there are plenty of disagreements, especially in economic matters.

The government-owned Qantas Airways is involved in a bitter dispute with United Airlines. Fearing that Qantas' Japan-Australia flights are threatened by United, the Australian government restricts the U.S. airline's New York-Tokyo-Sydney route to twice a week — a limit United calls economically unfeasible.

The United States and Australia also are at odds over the future of the Antarctic. Citing evidence that Antarctica is the world's weather factory and that even limited exploitation could upset its fragile environment and have global consequences, France and Australia favor a virtual hands-off policy. Sembler advances the United States' unpopular call for limited exploration, mining and research.

"It's a big continent, bigger than the United States," he says. "There's room for compromise."

Sembler also says being an ambassador is far more demanding than anything he did as a shopping center magnate. His responsibilities entail representing the United States and overseeing an embassy staff of more than 300 people.



Melvin Sembler's nomination drew plenty of critics.

Much of his time has been spent traveling Australia and becoming familiar with its six states and two territories. Protocol demands that he establish relationships with leaders of all areas and attend several receptions or banquets on an almost daily basis. He rarely is at the embassy in Canberra more than two days a week.

A multimillionaire who founded The Sembler Co. in Tennessee before moving it to St. Petersburg in 1968, Sembler now earns a more modest annual salary of \$82,500. It's still an enviable life.

"It's been a fascinating experience, and I highly recommend it," says Sembler, who shares the embassy's residential quarters with his wife, Betty.

The road to Canberra wasn't an easy one, however. Although the post of U.S. ambassador to Australia traditionally has been a plum assignment for a presidential supporter, Sembler's nomination aroused considerable opposition from some congressional members and foreign service veterans.

Sen. Paul Sarbanes, D-Md., was the most vocal critic, alleging that Sembler and another Tampa Bay businessman, Joseph Zappala, now ambassador to Spain, were nominated solely because they contributed heavily to President Bush's 1988 campaign. Several organizations of foreign service experts also opposed their nominations, and the comic strip "Doonesbury" satirized the process.

"When you get out of the private sector and into the political arena, you have to expect that," says Sembler. "George Bush knew who I was, and the Australians like my wife and I. We haven't had any negative press coverage. And Sarbanes? He didn't even know who Sembler was. He was off all by himself."

A spokesman for Sarbanes reiterated the senator's position.

"The point he made was not that they'd embarrass the country, but that with their lack of qualifications, they'd likely miss opportunities," said Bruce Frame.

Malcolm Toon, a former ambassador to four nations who also opposed the two nominees, said while he hadn't followed Sembler's performance, "I think the Australians are getting tired of having some political hack as ambassador," he said. "In the past 20 years, we've only sent one qualified professional there."

But Sembler, as well as Zappala, seems to have learned the first lesson of diplomacy, which is to forgive and forget. He said he bears no grudges toward his detractors.



MAY 17, 1990 St. Pete Times

## Envoy praises Australia, U.S. ties

By GILLIAN GAYNAIR  
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — The United States should continue its relations with Australia and persevere in its fight against drugs, the U.S. ambassador to Australia said Wednesday.



**Mel Sembler was appointed by President Bush in October.**

"Congress is not doing enough or passing enough laws. . . . You've got to get tough with the drug problem in the U.S. or it's going to eat us up," said Ambassador Mel Sembler, speaking to a home town audience

at the Tiger Bay Club at the St. Petersburg Hilton Inn and Tower.

Sembler, a shopping center developer and chairman of the Sembler Co., was appointed by President Bush in October. At the time Senate Democrats criticized his lack of foreign policy experience, and some questioned his contributions of more than \$100,000 to Bush's 1988 presidential campaign.

**"You've got to get tough with the drug problem in the U.S. or it's going to eat us up."**

— Mel Sembler

Sembler, who established Straight Inc., an alcohol and drug rehabilitation program, said he believes this country's anti-drug messages are having an impact, but he criticized U.S. officials for not doing enough.

Sembler also said he was impressed with various American agencies represented in Australia, mentioning military personnel and one of the three NASA space tracking stations. He also stressed that the success of U.S. organizations depends greatly on the relationship between the two nations.

"I don't know any closer association between nations than the one between the United States and Australia. . . . We share the same democratic heritage and respect for humanity and human rights," he said.

"Let me assure you that I'm optimistic with the valuable relationship between the U.S. and Australia. . . . It's anchored in friendship and mutual values," Sembler said. "We will be working hard to assure this valuable alliance with our good friends Down Under remains strong."

## Ambassador talks business

### St. Petersburg developer comfortable after a year in Spain

By STEPHANIE TRIPP  
Tribune Staff Writer

MADRID, Spain — A little more than year ago, Joseph Zappala was under a political microscope.

The U.S. Senate was deciding whether to approve the longtime St. Petersburg businessman as ambassador to Spain. A senator from Maryland was criticizing President Bush's choice of Zappala as a political reward.

Now, with a 79-20 approval vote from the Senate and a year on the job under his belt, the 57-year-old ambassador seems well-

**"The Fortune 500 companies have known Spain since the end of World War II. Now a goal is to make Spain known to more medium-sized and small businesses."**

— Joseph Zappala  
U.S. ambassador to Spain

settled in his new career as diplomat.

He played the gracious host last month when a trade delegation from his hometown arrived in Madrid. The hospitality included a continental breakfast, a full brief-

ing by his staff and an extravagant reception including some of the city's most notable political and business figures.

In an interview at his home in April, Zappala said his experience as a businessman is key in his new

job.

Indeed, much of Spain's story during the past five years has been that of the country's remarkable economic performance. In 15 short years the country has gone from totalitarian isolation to a rising star in Europe's economic arena, averaging growth in gross domestic product of 5 percent a year over the past four years.

The country's admission to the European Community in 1986 has pulled it into the political mainstream and has given it many op-

See AMBASSADOR, Page 2E



**Joseph Zappala, U.S. ambassador to Spain, says he wants to help small- and medium-sized businesses get a foothold in the Spanish market.**

## Ambassador says wealth of opportunities awaiting small firms in Spanish market

■ From Page 1E

portunities for economic development.

"A lot of energy for the growth of Spain comes from investment inside and out," Zappala said.

It is in recognizing opportunities and building relationships among U.S. and Spanish business interests that Zappala views as his strong point.

"The Fortune 500 companies have known Spain since the end of World War II," Zappala said. "Now a goal is to make Spain known to more medium-sized and small businesses. We have an embassy here that's both equipped to handle medium-sized and small-sized businesses."

The ambassador also stressed the importance of increasing cultural ties and educational ties with Spain.

Already this country's Fulbright fellowship program with Spain has grown to one of the largest in the world, with a budget of nearly \$10 million for the current academic year. Student exchanges between the two countries also are growing in popularity.

Zappala also noted two cultural links that had just been completed in March: The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Guggenheim Museum in New York had signed exchange agreements with the Spanish Ministry of Culture.

**"That was a difficult thing that took place (the United States' invasion of Panama). A comment I use is, 'Good friends sometimes disagree,' and I guess Panama was one of those times when maybe we had a disagreement."**

— Joseph Zappala  
U.S. Ambassador to Spain

Opportunities for further exchange will increase many fold in 1992, when Spain hosts the Summer Olympics in Barcelona, the World's Fair in Seville and celebrates the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' voyage to America.

As ambassador, Zappala said he plans to go all-out on U.S. participation in those events.

"I want to assure that we are represented in Spain during that festive year by the best America has to offer," Zappala told the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in March.

Giving that speech to the chamber, Zappala said, was one of the biggest thrills in his life.

It wasn't the subject matter or the audience that made it so important, but the location.

A born New Yorker who made his fortune in Florida, the ambassador was invited to return to the Big Apple and deliver his speech at the Plaza Hotel — a youthful dream come true.

Zappala's toughest time as U.S. Ambassador came late last year when Spain was among many nations condemning the United States for its military action in Panama.

Spain's historical relationship with Panama brought a lot of outcry against the U.S. in this country and protesters picketed the embassy in Madrid for several days.

"That was a difficult thing that took place," Zappala said. "A comment I use is, 'Good friends sometimes disagree,' and I guess Panama was one of those times when maybe we had a disagreement."

Still, the rockiest time for Zappala still seems to be those first weeks in the spotlight when he went from being a successful, low-key businessman to being a magnet for criticism and even a few jokes.

During those tough weeks, Zappala won the dubious honor of being a target of rapier-witted cartoonist Garry Trudeau. Zappala took the hit, well, like a diplomat.

"To tell you the truth, I loved it," Zappala said of the mention in Doonesbury. "I had a great chuckle with the friends and family and said, 'That's part of the turf.'"

While Zappala had no history of diplomatic service, he did have experience living abroad. He spent 2½ years in Germany in the early 1950s on a military assignment. He's traveled through Spain in the past.

Spanish lessons remain a part of the ambassador's daily regimen. His comprehension of the language is nearly 100 percent, he says, but in speaking he sometimes confuses words with Italian, which he speaks fluently.

He boasted in April that Spain's Queen Sophia praised a recent speech of his for its flawless Castilian Spanish.

Zappala begins his days at 8 a.m. and usually leaves his office around 7 p.m., usually to attend one of the myriad social functions that are a central part of his role in Madrid.

It's a busy schedule, but the ambassador seems more energized than wearied by it.

"It's a lot, but I enjoy it," he says.

On a spring trip to the U.S. he went through five states in six days.

"I like traveling — my wife does, as well," he said. "Jet lag doesn't bother me. I've got a constitution like a horse."

September 15, 1990  
3-B

## Ambassador's sister held in drug case

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (AP) — U.S. Magistrate J. Toliver Davis refused bail Thursday to a woman — identified as the sister of the U.S. ambassador to Spain — charged with money laundering and trafficking in cocaine.

Davis ordered Angela Zappala Lee returned to the federal Central District of Illinois in Springfield. On Aug. 23, a grand jury there indicted Lee and 23 others on the money and drug charges, alleged to have occurred between fall 1987 and summer 1988.

As part of the alleged money laundering, Lee bought \$41,722 worth of Western Union money orders. The indictment does not say where the money was sent.

Appearing in federal court in Asheville on Thursday, the 58-year-old Glensville waitress — identified by her attorney as the sister of Ambassador to Spain Joseph Zappala, a Pinellas County developer — said she would not oppose extradition. She was one of three defendants a federal judge in Illinois recommended be held without bail, according to an assistant U.S. attorney.

Asking for bail, Lee's attorney, Jim Caltagirone of Tampa, said Lee had offered the government "substantial assistance" by testifying in five trials in Hillsborough County. He said Lee intended to cooperate with federal prosecutors in connection with the Illinois charges.

...manason to enjoin the suspension of  
"has already suffered penalties from  
duct and is "without wheels anymore."

...ster Baynard pointed out  
wine as he u.

## Straight tells staff not to talk

"I do feel like it (warning) is to quiet us up and frighten the parents on the program," says Carolyn Henson, former Straight volunteer.

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Straight Inc. has sent letters to its current and former employees warning them not to reveal information about the drug treatment program because doing so could violate state confidentiality laws.

The letter also went to parents who have children enrolled in the program.

Some recipients say they believe the letter is meant to intimidate them from speaking out about Straight, which is under investigation by state health officials.

"IT HAS RECENTLY come to our attention that some of our past employees and/or directors have been releasing information about the treatment and identity of some of the persons treated at our Center," wrote James E. Hartz, Straight's executive director.

Should program officials learn of potential violations, Hartz wrote, "Straight Inc. shall do what it deems necessary to protect its best interests."

"I think they (Straight officials) are just trying to keep people quiet, because they don't want it to come out, what's going on over there," said one parent who asked not to be identified.

The letter is dated Feb. 10 — two days after Hartz was interviewed by *The St. Petersburg Times* concerning allegedly coercive and possibly illegal tactics used on Straight's juvenile clients.

The interview was reported in a copyrighted article that appeared last Sunday in *The Times* and quoted several sources, including unnamed former program counselors.

Hartz was unavailable for comment on the letter.

Based in a warehouse just north of St. Petersburg, Straight uses peer pressure and behavioral modification techniques on juveniles from 12 to 18.

Last December state officials who oversee the program's operating license began to investigate complaints that some Straight clients had been mistreated.

**THE INVESTIGATORS** ultimately said they could not prove any mistreatment charges. But they scolded Straight for apparently holding some clients against their will in violation of another state law.

In the letter, Hartz quoted portions of the confidentiality statute, which prohibits drug program employees or volunteers from revealing a client's name "except in a proceeding involving the question of licensure."

"I do feel like it (the letter) is to quiet us up and frighten the parents on the program," said Carolyn Henson, a former Straight volunteer.

"I think it's to keep them (parents or employees) from bringing their complaints to HRS or the newspaper or anyone else," she said.

# Straight Inc. Picks Site For Rehabilitation Center

Straight Inc., a drug and alcohol treatment program for pre-teens and teenagers, will locate a rehabilitation center on five acres near Largo.

Program President Mel Sembler said a site at 122nd Avenue N, south of Ulmerton Road, had been acquired from the Catholic Diocese, and Straight will build a \$350,000 one-story building at the site by the middle of next year.

The Spanish motif center will have a 500-seat auditorium, "rap rooms," intake rooms and a clinic, Sembler said. Blueprints were prepared by Mudano Associates of Clearwater.

Straight was begun September 1976 by local pro-

fessionals and businessmen to replace a program called "The Seed."

It is a private, non-profit corporation that receives federal grants from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and is monitored by the State Health and Rehabilitative Services department.

Straight recently was cleared by the State Attorney's office of charges that some patients were victims of unusual treatment methods. One of the charges leveled against Straight was that youths were made to perform mental tasks to embarrass them.

Previously, Straight operated in a northwest St. Petersburg warehouse dur-

ing the day and, at night, at foster homes run by parents of patients.

"Since our beginning two years ago, we have been moving around, living off the charity of the community," Sembler said in a press release. "Now, we will at long last have a permanent home."

Sembler also announced the start of a fundraising drive to build and operate the new center.

April 13, 1978.

## local

**'We're not viewing (Straight's) past sins relative to this license. We can't under the law.'**

— Lucy Hadi, HRS district administrator

# Straight Inc.'s license extended

■ Straight Inc. is a drug treatment program in Pinellas County that uses peer pressure and behavioral modification techniques on juveniles 12 to 18 years old. In recent months it has been under investigation by state health and administrative officials. ■

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Straight Inc.'s temporary operating license was again extended up to 90 days Tuesday while state officials reaffirm that program clients know their legal rights.

Once two sections of policy are revised, the drug program probably will have its full one-year license restored.

**THE LICENSE** restoration could occur within the next 30 to 45 days, said an official with the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

That would effectively end HRS's four-month investigation into Straight, which has been operating under a temporary license for the last 90 days. But questions of impropriety — including possible criminal misconduct — continue to hang over the drug program.

Others investigating Straight are Pinellas-Pasco State Atty. James T. Russell and state officials responsible

for a \$50,000 federal grant to the program.

"They (the questions) are ones dealing with the prior period (before HRS began its investigation)," explained Lucy Hadi, acting District 5 administrator. "Licensing (HRS's responsibility) has to deal with the current period."

"We're not viewing past sins relative to this license," she said. "We can't under the law."

In a letter Monday to Melvin F. Sembler, Straight's board president, Ms. Hadi wrote that the program is "in compliance with all but two items" in an 18-point monitoring plan drawn up by HRS in February.

**THAT'S WHEN** HRS found that some Straight clients may have been illegally held in the drug program against their will. Straight since has told HRS that all clients — except those ordered there by judges — can leave whenever they like.

But some clients and their parents apparently don't completely understand how that procedure works, Ms. Hadi said.

Straight also must modify its "strip and search" guidelines, Ms. Hadi said.

When a client enters the program, he is ordered to disrobe so counselors can search him for smuggled drugs. Straight's policy does not explain what

counselors would do if a client exercised his legal right to resist the search.

Straight's "treatment planning process" also fails to conform with state regulations, Ms. Hadi said, and should be modified so clients have well defined treatment goals.

In the letter, Ms. Hadi praised "the strides made by Straight Inc. during the past ninety days."

Because of the program's complex behavioral modification techniques, she said, Straight's professional advisory board of psychologists should be more involved in treatment practices. HRS regulations merely require that a drug program HAVE a professional advisory board, she said.

Sembler, asked about the program's second temporary license, said, "We're not happy about it." But he added, "I'm sure we'll have full licensure."

**MS. HADI** said some of Straight's operating problems occurred because HRS failed to provide the program with adequate "technical assistance."

As a result, she said, HRS has beefed up its drug-abuse licensing committee from seven to 11 persons and is revising its monitoring methods.

"We have learned a lot through this process (of investigating Straight)," she said.

# Payments to Straight drug program suspended

■ *Straight Inc. is a drug treatment program in Pinellas County that uses peer pressure and behavioral modification techniques on juveniles from 12 to 18. In recent months it has been under investigation by state health officials. Now, other agencies have begun questioning its operation.* ■

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Federal grant payments to Straight Inc. have been suspended "because of continuing allegations" and "conflict-of-interest questions" overshadowing the program, a state official said Thursday.

Although the payments could resume if the allegations are proven false, the official described the action as "serious."

"Yes sir, we don't suspend someone's funding lightly or whimsically," said Dr. John H. Dale Jr., assistant chief of the Bureau of Criminal Justice Planning and Assistance.

"IT'S NEVER A light or capricious action ... you're talking about people's paychecks."

Of the \$50,000 grant to Straight, \$5,000 remains to be disbursed. Dale said that money was being withheld because "it's easier to hold money than it is to get it back."

He explained that if officials find that Straight improperly used the grant, they could order the program to return some of the money to the government.

Dr. Leon Sellers, a member of Straight's governing board, also confirmed to *The St. Petersburg Times* Thursday that the program has employed children of three current or former board members — Richard G. Batchelor, Helen R. Petermann and Marlene Hauser.

SUCH EMPLOYMENT may violate federal conflict-of-interest law, state officials said. And that is one reason the grant payments were stopped.

But Sellers said the three relatives were not hired out of favoritism, but instead were "selected on the basis of merit."

Dale and a high-level official with the State Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) — which has been investigating Straight for several months — plan to visit the program Tuesday to investigate.

They also will question why out of Straight's more than 450 clients, only one has been black, said Dale.

"Anytime public confidence in a program is questioned, there's a reason for it," said Dale. "We assume where there's smoke there's fire."

SINCE LAST SPRING, Straight has been receiving monthly payments from a \$50,000 Law Enforcement Assistance Administration grant. The money is used to pay employee salaries, and it is controlled by Straight's governing board.

Federal regulations bar any official from participating in proceedings involving grant money "where to his knowledge, he or his immediate family ... has a financial interest."

In January, accountants with the city of St. Petersburg — which helps administer Straight's grant — discovered that the money had been improperly comingled into a single bank account. The accounts since have been separated.

Straight's executive director James E. Hartz declined to comment for this article, despite repeated requests from *The Times*. A spokesman for Hartz asked that a reporter submit his questions in writing.

Earlier this month, the spokesman made a similar request when *The Times* sought Hartz' comment for another article. Though the newspaper complied, Hartz never responded.

IN A MEETING with *Times* editors last week, Hartz and several Straight board members complained that the program had been given unfair treatment in recent news articles. They insisted that they wanted to be open and candid about Straight's operation.

One board member present at that meeting was treasurer John White, a financial official with the city of St. Petersburg.

White said Thursday that the grant suspension probably would not hamper Straight's immediate operation. He also said he thought the suspension was unnecessary.

"But I don't know what all is involved," he said. "All I've got basically is what I've read in the paper."

"I'm not involved in the program on a day to day basis."

IN A RELATED development, recently fired HRS administrator Robert G. Marshall — the man who ordered the initial Straight investigation — has questioned whether complaints from Straight officials sparked his dismissal.

A spokesman for HRS Secretary William J. Page Jr. denied that the firing was related. But the spokesman conceded that Straight officials had complained about Marshall.

Board member White said that on one occasion a Straight official did complain to Page. But he said, "I don't know who it was ... I wasn't there."

St. Petersburg Times

Publication Date: 2/20/87

Page: 17

HD: Straight brings its drug fight to county

BY: WENDY WEYEN

DL: TAMPA

EX: TAMPA - Straight Inc., a nationally known drug program based in St. Petersburg, announced Thursday it has opened an office in Hillsborough County.

The office, at 4819 E Busch Blvd., will make it easier for residents of Hillsborough County to find out more about Straight, said Joan Street, director for community services for the drug-treatment program.

Some follow-up counseling will take place in the new Hillsborough office, which has been open for about two months. Most of the treatment for bay area young people, however, will continue to take place in the Pinellas Park office, Street said.

More than 60 percent of the young people treated at Straight's Pinellas County office live in Hillsborough, Street said.

"We wanted a facility that would be more convenient to families in Hillsborough, especially the northern part of Hillsborough County," Street said.

Straight describes itself as a family-oriented drug rehabilitation program for drug users between the ages of 12 and 21. The program has been controversial, because Straight accepts children against their will.

The 1st District Court of Appeal in Tallahassee ruled in support of that practice in January. The court declared parents can force their children into drug-treatment facilities without their consent or a judge's order.

Officials with the Hillsborough County schools said Thursday they did not think Straight had received approval to give presentations in county classrooms.

"As long as it's a quality program and meets the standards and guidelines that we all must follow, that's fine," said Bob Patterson, coordinator for the elementary health program, which includes drug-awareness programs such as those through the C.E. Mendez Foundation Inc.

"We need all the resources available in this area," said Okie Fletcher, supervisor for the district's health education.

Fletcher added, however, that he did not want to use the school system as a referral agency.

"I'm somewhat reluctant to open up the classroom for agencies whose objective is a commercial venture as such," Fletcher said.

Street, however, said Straight already has made some presentations in Hillsborough schools. She said she was scheduled to give three half-hour assemblies at Plant High School next week.

SC: TAMPA

PG: 17

AT: drug opening

ED: CITY





**Mel Sembler**  
Sembler Co.

<sup>Dec 26, 1987</sup>  
Appointments

**Sembler Co.:** Mel Sembler, chairman of the Sembler Co. in St. Petersburg and chairman of the board of STRAIGHT Inc., has been named by President Reagan as a conferee to the White House Conference for Drug-Free America.

## Jury awards \$721,000 to ex-client of drug treatment program

MIKE COPELAND  
Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Jurors Thursday awarded a woman \$721,000 after agreeing she was assaulted and held against her will 17 years ago by employees of the Straight Inc. drug treatment program. Karen Norton fought back tears, hugged her lawyers and thanked jurors after the award — the largest ever in the program's controversial history and \$55,000 more than her lawyers asked for.

"At last someone listened to me," said Norton, 25. "I'm happy. I waited a long

time."

The three-man, three-woman jury decided in a little more than two hours that Straight was liable for assault and battery, false imprisonment, negligence and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

Jurors said Norton should receive \$106,000 in compensatory damages for her 17-month ordeal as a client of Straight. They awarded \$615,000 in punitive damages.

A mediator once recommended that Norton be given \$12,500 to settle the 5-year-old lawsuit, said William Rutger, Straight's Clearwater lawyer. But Straight and Norton

couldn't agree.

Senior Judge Joseph P. McNulty told jurors their verdict "is certainly justified in the evidence."

Straight spokeswoman Joy Margolis said Thursday night the organization will appeal the award.

"The compensatory damages were excessive and the punitive damages were inexcusable," Margolis said. Noting that the dispute involves incidents that occurred eight years ago, Margolis said, "Straight is a completely different organization from what we were then."

"We're very sorry to see this happen

because we have helped thousands of families and kids get off drugs, and it's a very worthwhile program," Margolis said.

Norton's lawsuit said she was harassed, embarrassed and mocked by Straight employees bent on humiliating and upsetting her. She said she was forced to remain in the program — where relatives had placed her — despite repeated pleas to leave.

She was thrown up against a wall by the program's assistant director, strip-searched and jeered by staff members, intimidated, bruised, cursed and forced to exercise despite complaining she was in pain, according to her lawsuit.

"What we were really against, basically, was that she was 18 years old and that she was not permitted to leave," juror Katherine Haynes of St. Petersburg said Thursday.

Straight attorney Rutger told jurors the "confrontation" was essential for effective drug treatment.

Rutger also emphasized during closing arguments Thursday that Straight's approach to drug treatment has evolved dramatically since the "horse and buggy" days when Norton was admitted.

Karen Barnett, one of Norton's lawyers

See DRUG, Page 1

## Drug program to appeal award

■ From Page 1B

told jurors Straight had no business "experimenting with human life."

The national program, founded in 1972, is headquartered in St. Petersburg.

Straight has agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars in settlements to other former patients who complained of being held by Straight against their will.

One former patient was awarded \$220,000 in 1983 in a federal lawsuit.

In 1984, Straight officials were warned by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services

(HRS) to stop coercing teen-agers into drug treatment or risk losing their state license.

Last year, Straight's license to operate in Florida was renewed by HRS for three months instead of the customary year. HRS cited a state report that patients only had limited access to an abuse hot line, bathroom privileges were restricted, and some records were sloppy or incomplete.

But the license has since been renewed twice — each time for a full year, HRS district spokeswoman Elaine Fulton-Jones said last week.

"We've had real success in working together with them," she

# Straight client wins her suit

*St. Pete Times Nov. 10, 1990*

■ The woman alleged she was abused and kept in the drug-treatment facility against her will.

By MARK JOURNEY  
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Karen Norton still cries when she talks about being forbidden from seeing her dying grandfather while she was in treatment at a Straight Inc. drug rehabilitation program.

As a result of her 18-month stay at the St. Petersburg facility when she was 17, she still has nightmares, is fearful of counselors and has trouble dealing with her anger. Norton says she was battered and kept at the facility against her will.

"It's something that will affect for the rest of my life," Norton, 25, recently told a six-member jury.

The jurors agreed. Thursday, they awarded her \$721,000, the largest award ever against Straight Inc., said Karen Barnett, Norton's attorney.

"In theory and on paper, this place looks great," the attorney said. "The problem is they don't follow their own policies or proce-

dures."

In her lawsuit filed in 1985, Norton alleged the former director, Virgil Miller Newton, grabbed her and threw her against a wall, screamed that she no longer had "any rights" and told her she would not be allowed to leave the facility.

Norton, who now lives in Jacksonville, said she was denied health care and once collapsed and had to be rushed to a hospital for an emergency appendectomy. She also claimed she was subject to incompetent staff members and other clients who helped control the other teen-agers in treatment.

In her most dramatic testimony during the nine-day trial, she told jurors how she was not allowed to visit her dying grandfather in Jacksonville. When he died, Norton said she was not told about it until after the funeral two weeks later.

After turning 18, Norton said she fled the facility.

Joy Margolis, a spokeswoman for Straight Inc., which operates eight facilities nationwide, denied Norton's charges and said Straight has changed much since Norton was placed in the program by her parents eight years ago.

"The Straight program was to-

tally different from what it is now," she said. "No one in current management was here in 1982."

Margolis also said Straight since has been accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations and its counselors are certified.

Barnett said jurors awarded Norton \$106,000 in compensatory damages and \$615,000 in punitive damages.

"We thought that compensatory damages were excessive and we thought the punitive damages were inexcusable. . . ." Margolis said. "We thought it was a very unfair ruling (verdict)."

Margolis said Straight would appeal the decision to the Second District Court of Appeal in Lakeland.

Barnett conceded it likely will be several years before Norton receives the money, but noted it will collect 12 percent interest while the outcome of the appeal is pending.

"It was great," said Barnett, who has handled three other cases against Straight. "I just can't see where there was any (legal) error. The facts were there to support every last dollar."

## HRS examines some aspects of program

■ From Page 1B

lem teen-agers — a practice HRS "unilaterally opposes," said Michael Becker, district administrator for HRS in Pinellas and Pasco counties.

Several other instances of patients restraining patients were found during the review, according to the report.

Becker said HRS officials are changing the state's administrative code to prohibit the practice, which often can lead to injury.

"For us, it's a serious concern," he said. "A lot of it is involved in their concept of peer counseling. But it takes peer counseling a step beyond what it should be."

Sembler, a shopping center developer from Treasure Island who recently was picked by President Bush to be the ambassador-designate to Australia, founded Straight in 1976. The program started in Pinellas Park and has expanded nationwide.

Straight treats 12- to 21-year-olds by using intense peer pressure, rigid house rules and counseling methods similar to those used by Alcoholics Anonymous. The non-profit organization boasts a 65 percent success rate, considered extremely high for a drug rehabilitation program.

President George Bush called Straight "inspiring" when he visited the Pinellas Park facility at 3001 Gandy Blvd. in March 1987 and former First Lady Nancy Reagan offered similar praise when she visited in 1982.

But critics accuse Straight of brainwashing and physically abusing patients, charges that have sparked at least five lawsuits against the organization. At least two have been settled. Straight officials denied those allegations, and HRS has no confirmed reports of abuse at the facility.

# Drug program attacked in HRS report

By PHIL WILLON  
Tribune Staff Writer

PINELLAS PARK — The license of a controversial alcohol and drug treatment facility has been renewed for only three months following a state report criticizing the use of patients to overpower and restrain other patients and their limited access to an abuse hot line.

Straight Inc. of Pinellas Park also restricted bathroom privileges for some patients and kept sloppy and incomplete treatment records, according to an inspection report released this week by the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. Similar items were cited after an HRS inspection a year ago, records show.

The problems were considered so extensive that HRS officials have renewed Straight's license for only three months, not the standard year granted to the county's 26 other treatment facilities, said Bob Holm of the HRS Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Program Office in St. Petersburg.

Melvin F. Sembler, Straight's executive director, discounted the report as another unfounded attack on what he said is the nation's most successful alcohol and drug abuse rehabilitation program.

"I don't view it as a problem," Sembler said. "We've been going through this sort of thing for 15 years. I don't worry too much about it. It's the best program in the United States."

The report stems from a May 23 HRS site review which included interviews with patients and staff and a study of the patients' clinical records and Straight's policies and procedures.

Records of nine patients that were reviewed were found to be incomplete or out of compliance. Some lacked proper dates or signa-

66 We've been going through this sort of thing for 15 years. I don't worry too much about it. It's the best program in the United States." 99

— Melvin F. Sembler,  
Straight's executive director

tures. In other cases, patients with serious problems — including one rape victim — were not receiving the special counseling they required, the report stated.

Some patients had to get permission from staff before they could use a telephone to call the HRS abuse hot line, according to the report. Others were prevented from using the hot line until they explained the reason for the call during a group counseling session.

Both violate HRS statutes, which mandate that patients at a treatment facility must have free access to the hot line, Holm said.

Many of Straight's staff members weren't aware there were any restrictions, he said.

Straight's license will be reviewed again in August to see if corrections have been made, Holm said. Straight officials also have 30 days to respond to the allegations and suggested corrections included in the report.

"Before we're going to grant them a regular license, they're going to have to do some work," Holm said.

The report stated that in one instance a Straight patient with a black belt in karate routinely helped staff members restrain prob-

See HRS, Page 8B

## Straight from 18

sound business practice. If successful, Straight stands to collect hundreds of thousands of dollars in overdue payments.

"We have a lot of people we have carried for a long time, and they owe us an awful lot of money," said Straight spokeswoman Joy Margolis.

But in interviews and court documents, many of those families are firing back, accusing Straight of deceptive, high-pressure sales tactics and abusive treatment.

Patricia Neumann of Lake Alfred in Polk County said in court documents that Straight officials "committed fraud" by coercing her to sign a blank contract committing her son to treatment. The coercion, she alleged, included "several hours of mental intimidation" and being told that her son "would die without treatment."

Robert and Veronica McCallion of St. Petersburg said in court papers that Straight officials were "unprincipled" and "had no intention of living up to their promise of treatment and rehabilitation" for their daughter.

Darlene Licata of Spring Hill in Hernando County said her daughter was strip-searched and verbally abused by Straight officials.

"I don't pay for verbal abuse," Mrs. Licata said. "I don't pay for any kind of abuse."

Straight spokeswoman Margolis said the criticism is unfounded. "Sounds to me like they didn't pay their bills and are looking for excuses," she said.

"Dysfunctional people look for other places to put the blame," she added. "We don't stand on the

street corners with guns forcing people to go in."

Florida regulators of drug treatment programs give Straight high marks. Straight also has drawn praise from Nancy Reagan and President Bush.

But in several other states, Straight programs recently have come under severe criticism. Straight pulled out of Virginia this week after state officials refused to renew its license, citing a long history of violations. Straight closed its California branch last year when regulators there refused it a license because of concerns about abusive treatment methods.

Similar concerns prompted Massachusetts last month to pull Straight's foster care license.

Straight lawyers have fared better in Pinellas civil court, getting settlements and judgments against dozens of families.

In November, for example, the Ferrises settled with Straight, "just to get rid of them," Mrs. Ferris said.

"The organization is like a bad penny: You think you're done with them, but they keep popping up," she said.

b7D

check this out!

What about the allegations!

Dysfunctional people who has host homes!

wine as he u.

ster Baynard pointed out

manason to enjoin the suspension  
"has already suffered penalties from  
duct and is "without wheels anymore."

## Straight tells staff not to talk

"I do feel like it (warning) is to quiet us up and frighten the parents on the program," says Carolyn Henson, former Straight volunteer.

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Straight Inc. has sent letters to its current and former employees warning them not to reveal information about the drug treatment program because doing so could violate state confidentiality laws.

The letter also went to parents who have children enrolled in the program.

Some recipients say they believe the letter is meant to intimidate them from speaking out about Straight, which is under investigation by state health officials.

"IT HAS RECENTLY come to our attention that some of our past employees and-or directors have been releasing information about the treatment and identity of some of the persons treated at our Center," wrote James E. Hartz, Straight's executive director.

Should program officials learn of potential violations, Hartz wrote, "Straight Inc. shall do what it deems necessary to protect its best interests."

"I think they (Straight officials) are just trying to keep people quiet, because they don't want it to come out, what's going on over there," said one parent who asked not to be identified.

The letter is dated Feb. 10 — two days after Hartz was interviewed by *The St. Petersburg Times* concerning allegedly coercive and possibly illegal tactics used on Straight's juvenile clients.

The interview was reported in a copyrighted article that appeared last Sunday in *The Times* and quoted several sources, including unnamed former program counselors.

Hartz was unavailable for comment on the letter.

Based in a warehouse just north of St. Petersburg, Straight uses peer pressure and behavioral modification techniques on juveniles from 12 to 18.

Last December state officials who oversee the program's operating license began to investigate complaints that some Straight clients had been mistreated.

**THE INVESTIGATORS** ultimately said they could not prove any mistreatment charges. But they scolded Straight for apparently holding some clients against their will in violation of another state law.

In the letter, Hartz quoted portions of the confidentiality statute, which prohibits drug program employees or volunteers from revealing a client's name "except in a proceeding involving the question of licensure."

"I do feel like it (the letter) is to quiet us up and frighten the parents on the program," said Carolyn Henson, a former Straight volunteer.

"I think it's to keep them (parents or employees) from bringing their complaints to HRS or the newspaper or anyone else," she said.

b6  
b7c

## Health officials give Straight conditional approval, say runaway girl wants to stay

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

State health officials cannot prove charges that an 18-year-old girl was held illegally at the Straight Inc. drug treatment program, a spokesman for the State Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) said Wednesday.

The girl has told investigators that she wants to remain at Straight, even though she twice tried to run away.

Three weeks ago a group of Largo residents said they saw the girl run from a Straight foster home at about 7:30 one morning, wearing only a robe, slippers and blue jeans. She was captured by Straight counselors minutes later after telephoning her sister from a neighboring house.

**THE GIRL THEN** was returned to Straight's Park Street headquarters, just north of St. Petersburg. Her parents were called and they convinced her to remain, Straight officials have said.

State law prohibits drug treatment programs from holding juveniles against their will.

Officials declined to identify the girl by name. But at a parents' meeting a few days after the incident, a slight, blond girl who identified herself as Gail Stevenson said she had tried to run away, but now wanted to remain at Straight.

Brenda Stevenson — who identified herself as the girl's sister and said she lives away from her parents — reacted skeptically to the investigation results.

"They (Straight) won't let me see her," said Miss Stevenson. "I'm gonna try somehow to see her and let her tell me to my face that she wants to stay there. They (Gail's parents) told her once that if she left they'd get a court order to put her back in the program."

Last December, HRS began investigating other charges against the nonprofit program, which uses peer-pressure, behavior-modification treatments on juveniles from 12 to 18.

**INVESTIGATORS FOUND** that Straight may have illegally held some clients against their will. They also gave the program a 90-day conditional license, rather than a normal one-year license. Officials with HRS, however, declined to release their full investigative report.

The parents of many Straight clients praise the program and say it has cured their children of drug abuse. The program also has won the backing of many law enforcement and juvenile court officials, including Circuit Judge Jack Dadswell, who has ordered many youths into Straight as an alternative to jail.

In a copyrighted article earlier this month, *The St. Petersburg Times* quoted several former Straight counselors who charged that the program used a variety of coercive tactics to control clients.

The runaway girl's statement to HRS closes that portion of its Straight investigation, the spokesman said. However, officials will continue to monitor the program through April, when they must decide whether to renew or revoke Straight's license.

## Drug program allegedly used coercive tactics to control clients

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer  
© 1978, The St. Petersburg Times

Coercive tactics, including threatening a youth with a cocked handgun, have been used to control juvenile clients enrolled in the Straight Inc. drug treatment program, former counselors say.

Some of the tactics may have been illegal.

Behind-the-scenes accounts given by former counselors portray Straight as being sharply different from the passive and loving treatment program its leaders contend it is.

**TWO FORMER** counselors — in sworn statements — say they once stood by as Helen R. Petermann, Straight's program director, repeatedly slapped a small youth and yanked him by the hair in an apparent outburst of temper.

"I saw maybe five good smacks," one ex-counselor says.

On at least two occasions, they say, pro-

gram officials prepared questionable documents to intimidate clients into staying at Straight even though the youths may have had a legal right to leave.

A uniformed St. Petersburg police officer was once enlisted to threaten a juvenile with arrest to scare him into staying at Straight against his will, a former counselor says.

Dozens of client treatment reports were deliberately falsified by the counselors. And they say James E. Hartz, Straight's executive director, condoned it.

Another ex-counselor says Hartz — "kind of like, off the record" — encouraged counselors to physically detain clients who tried to run away. The counselors say Hartz never told them that state law forbids holding some juveniles against their will.

**"THERE WERE LOADS** of times when I had to tackle somebody," a former counselor says.

Straight officials generally deny the allegations.

"I don't feel I have to defend it (the program) because I know what we're doing is good, it's just and I know that we're not out to hurt anyone," Hartz says.

He acknowledges that the program operated for more than a year before he informed counselors that they could not legally detain some clients against their will.

Until state health officials told him of the law last December, he says, "I never heard of it." The law has been in effect since 1972.

Based in a Park Street warehouse just north of St. Petersburg, Straight is a private, non-profit program using peer-pressure behavioral modification techniques on juveniles from 12 to 18.

**TWO FORMER** Straight staffers recall a peculiar treatment session that they believe had little to do with saving juveniles from the evils of drug abuse.

They say Mrs. Petermann, 56, allegedly demonstrated different positions of sexual intercourse to a group of female clients, some

in their early teens.

Mrs. Petermann was unavailable for comment on any of the allegations. She declined to return several telephone calls from *The St. Petersburg Times*.

Hartz asked that all questions involving Straight be directed to him and said he knows of no such sex discussion.

But the subject of sex occasionally comes up during program treatments, he says, and it is "normal" that juveniles have questions.

"Helen's a very uninhibited person," Hartz said. If the session occurred, he said, "it might have been done better in private."

**PERHAPS THE MOST** serious allegation related by several sources dates back to February 1977, when a member of Straight's governing board — Richard G. Batchelor — led a band of juveniles in search of a runaway.

One member of the group carried a gun and — according to a witness' sworn statement — threatened to shoot a youth who was thought to have been aiding the runaway.

The band ultimately caught the runaway and wrestled him to the ground. When police arrived to break up the disturbance, no gun was found.

After two telephone conversations last week, Batchelor denied that a gun was used. During the first conversation he said "I will neither confirm that nor deny it."

Minutes later, after he said he had spoken to Straight director Hartz, Batchelor called back to say "I deny it."

"I did see a piece of pipe and that's what the police were told," he said. Then he said, "No, I'm not sure it was a piece of pipe... the police were told what they (others present) thought was a gun was a piece of pipe."

"I don't believe in guns or violence," he said. "You're finding out things I don't want you to know about people."

See STRAIGHT, 14-B



## 2nd drug rehab center under fire

By ANNE BARTLETT  
Tribune Staff Writer

ORLANDO — The state has given a second Straight Inc. drug rehabilitation center a license for only three months rather than a year because of its methods of restraining patients and other concerns.

The criticism of the Orlando center is similar to that by the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services' of the organization's Pinellas Park facility, which last week received a three-month license renewal.

HRS issued a report on both centers, following routine inspections. HRS typically renews the licenses of drug and alcohol re-

habilitation programs for one year.

The Orlando report also praises the dedication of the staff and adult volunteers. Employees "appear to be committed to helping clients succeed and gain the maximum benefit from the program," it states. Straight has 30 days to respond.

Linda Hedden, Straight's vice president for resource development, declined comment on the Orlando report Thursday because program officials have not read it.

However, Straight officials have said the HRS report on the Pinellas Park center is a naive swipe at a program that the state doesn't really understand.

Straight is a 13-year-old drug and alcohol rehabilitation program for young people

ages 13 to 21. It uses intense peer pressure and counseling methods similar to Alcoholics Anonymous.

The controversial program has about 1,000 clients in centers in nine cities.

President Bush called the program "inspiring" when he visited Pinellas Park in March 1987 and former first lady Nancy Reagan praised it as well.

Critics contend the program brainwashes and physically abuses patients. At least five lawsuits have been filed against the organization. At least two have been settled.

It was founded by Mel Sembler, a Treasure Island developer who has been nominated U.S. ambassador to Australia by President Bush. The Senate Foreign Rela-

tions Committee this week delayed action on Sembler's nomination after Sen. Paul Sarbanes, D-Md., questioned the qualifications of Sembler and three other nominees.

Sembler said last week that he didn't view the Pinellas Park report as a problem. "I don't worry too much about it," he said. "It's the best program in the United States."

The HRS report on the Orlando center, based on an inspection from May 31 to June 2, criticizes Straight's methods of restraining and monitoring patients and what it calls inconsistent record keeping.

See HRS, Page 6B

# Straight from 1-8

As Newton puts it, "The 'do drugs' message is so strong that you just can't isolate the kid from it."  
At Straight, the approach is to do just that.

## Getting 'straight'

Teen-agers enter Straight out off from their friends and families. They have no rights. Boys are held by their belt loops as they are escorted around the premises during their first week at the program; girls are taken by their hair. Activities are closely controlled: Clients can shower at specified times and for specified periods, brush their teeth and comb their hair for only a certain number of strokes and talk only when called upon.

Rights to talk to parents, read books and watch television are taken away, then "earned" back as teen-agers pass through five progressive phases of treatment. The first phase involves developing "self," says Newton. It means being "honest" about one's past as a "druggie." While teen-agers are in this phase of the program, they live with other clients' families until they have earned the right to "come home."

IN THE SECOND phase, the teen-agers can live at home and commute daily. In the third phase, they can attend school by day and Straight at night and on weekends. The fourth phase stresses developing friendships and the fifth phase — the "sharing stage" — is when the client may become a peer counselor and, ultimately, leave the program.

Clients who are almost "straight" assist about a dozen young junior and senior paid staff members — all of them former clients — who make up the bulk of Straight's staff. There are five full-time professionals on the staff and one clinical psychologist who shares his time between the St. Petersburg and the Sarasota branches.

"If you look at the whole process, what we do here is sort of force a regression," says Dr. William Gies, the clinical psychologist. "That is, we go back to about the toddler age and teach toilet training in a somewhat esoteric way. The belt loop phenomenon is much like what a parent would do with a toddler. The relationship is obvious."

The day begins with the Straight sing-along and perhaps a recitation of self-improvement pledges known as "The Seven Steps." Then the teen-agers begin the first of three daily group therapy sessions called "rapa." In a large, hot auditorium, seated in hard plastic chairs, boys and girls ages 12 to 18 face two staff members and embark on discussions that begin with broad themes, then narrow down to personal observations.

"ONE OF THE most delightful group sessions I attended was on the theme bulls—, different kinds of bulls—," Gies says. "And the kids got into different kinds of bulls— associated with drug use and then the kinds of things they see around them that are bulls— and things that are going on in the group that are bulls—."

"There's a tendency in the group through any given session to relate to the past, then relate to where they are now at the differences are, where they want to go in the future, and what they're going to do about it," he says.

Motivation and honesty are encouraged. Suspected dishonesty and unwillingness to participate are attacked. Two former clients interviewed by The St. Petersburg Times said the rap sessions for most clients amounted to little more than phony confessions where teen-agers "confessed" things they never did because such "honest" self-examination is seen as the only ticket out of the program.

"To please a counselor or to shut someone up from putting you down, you always had to tell a big, dramatic story," says former client Jeanine Wright, 18, who ran away from the program last spring after five months there. "Some of the things they talked about applied to me, but a lot of it didn't. Every time I tried to tell them about my past, they would sit me down and tell me I was being dishonest."

"PEOPLE WOULD lie through their ears to get 'better,'" recalls former client Michael Calabrese, 18, who ran away from the program last October after three months. "If you said things that were unpopular, it was discouraged, like that not very many of your friends were druggies or that you had a good job and were doing well. You were supposed to confess all kinds of bad stuff, and if you didn't, they figured you were lying."

But other former clients say the rap sessions cut close to the bone, forced them to examine themselves and, in the long run, developed their self-confidence to the point where they could refuse drugs.

Nancy Minton, 21, who left the program after a year and one month, says she is sure that "there were some younger kids in the program who did that [lied to get ahead]," but says that it was due to the drug environment they had just been yanked from. "Outside, you get just as much pressure from peers to do things wrong. I don't just see what's wrong with using peer pressure to encourage someone to do something right."

Those who want to advance through the program must stand before the group at specially scheduled rapa twice a week and announce that they feel ready to progress.

The request is discussed by the group, which then votes on it. A decision is made later the same day by the senior and executive staff, which rarely goes against the group vote. The decision is announced before the evening's "open mic."

## A family affair

At the open meetings, which parents are required to attend on a regular basis, teen-agers new to the program stand up before the packed audience and confess their drug use and what it did to them: the stealing, the sex, the hostility toward their parents and society. They talk about their feelings — mostly guilt — and how they will better themselves at Straight.

Family contact is limited to the tightly controlled open meetings until the teen-ager reaches the second phase and is allowed to return home. The teen-agers, boys separate from girls, sit on one side of the auditorium. Before the parents are led in, staff members tell them to sit up straight, tuck in their shirts, look neat and smile. As the parents are being led through the back of the auditorium, the children are singing another Straight sing-along:

*I am straight, I can do anything... anything.  
I am strong, I am invincible... invincible.  
I am straight, I can do anything... anything.*

Parents applaud when the song ends. Between them and their children 20 feet away, two teen-ager staff members sit on stools. The seating is planned so no parent can look directly across at his child. Eye contact between family members is forbidden.

After the teen-agers' confessions, a collection is taken from the parents.

THEN THE PARENTS speak to their children by microphone. Many simply say, "I love you... Talk to you later." Others admonish their children to work harder at getting "straight." Some talk about the pain and resentment they feel because of the way they were deceived and others say flatly that their children are unwelcome at home until they are "straight."

All through the open meeting, the names of those teen-agers who have reached "second phase" and can go home for the duration of Straight's program are announced. Each time, the named youth jumps up, scrambles across his or her peers, runs to the other side of the auditorium and keeps open-armed into a tearful embrace. The family hugs to thunderous applause — an emotional display made all the more powerful by the chilling confessions which began the meeting.

At the meeting's close, parents, clients and staff members join hands and sing a prayer. Then parents turn to those seated next to them and embrace.

The message is carefully orchestrated and powerful: Straight brings families — all families — together again. The parents seem relieved and grateful.

STRAIGHT DEMANDS an exhausting commitment from parents. All must attend a mandatory number of open meetings, even if it means commuting from out of state. After the open meetings, the parents must attend their own rap sessions where they learn about their child's involvement in the program, the ways of the "drug culture" and what to expect at home. The meetings last just minutes.

The entire program takes at least six months to complete, Newton says. The average stay is 10 to 11 months, though some clients have stayed in the program as long as two years. The cost, Straight says, ranges from \$750 to \$1,700 for the whole program, depending upon a family's ability to pay, plus \$35 per month for food.

The fees make up 70 percent of Straight's \$448,000 annual budget. The rest comes from donations (such as those made at the open meetings), says Straight Executive Director James Hartz. Straight will not turn away clients in need of help, no matter what their financial status, Hartz says.

But no one goes to Straight for free. "I really don't know how many poor clients there are at Straight," Hartz says. "My philosophy is very simple: If you don't pay for something, that's about how much you value it." Almost all the clients at Straight are white.

## Who gets straight?

Since September 1976, when Straight opened, about 1,800 teen-agers have been enrolled. Roughly 600 have completed the program and only 300 of those — less than a fifth — have stayed completely away from drugs, Newton says.

Most of the teen-agers in the program are referred there by parents who already have children in the program or know others who do, says Newton. Some have been referred there by school officials, police and, in the past, the Juvenile Court.

But during the past two years, the Pinellas-Pasco Juvenile Court has virtually stopped referring youthful drug offenders to the Straight program. And judges say they never send them there merely at the request of parents.

"ALMOST NEVER do we court-order them into the program," says Judge Jack Page. Page says he hasn't ordered a juvenile into Straight since reports surfaced about three years ago that Straight was keeping clients against their will. Though Page thinks the program has been very successful with some clients, he chooses Oper-

ation PAR (Parental Awareness and Responsibility) because that program does not take children away from their families.

"It [the PAR program] is a... program and a little more normal," Page says. At Straight can involve more than a jail sentence for the original drug-related offense that brings the teen-ager into court, he says. "The PAR program is more in keeping with the length of time and degree of involvement you'll find for community control," Page says.

"Straight is highly intensive, and involves the entire family, more time and more money [than PAR]... The kids go under a lot of pressure, and I'm not the one to put them under that pressure."

There was a time when Judge Robert Michael ordered teen-agers into Straight as a matter of normal disposition, he says. But now he is reluctant to order juveniles into the program, even for drug offenses.

"I'M SURE THAT when parents get desperate, they welcome any program that will help their kids. But for those who don't need it [the kind of intense program Straight offers], I don't think you should be putting them there just to put them in the program," he said.

Judge Michael also sends most of his juvenile drug offenders to PAR. He has not ordered a child into Straight in almost a year.

## Controversy remains

Troubles at Straight first surfaced in December 1977, after six directors resigned to protest management and treatment techniques at the program. One director accused the nonprofit corporation of "misfeasance, malfeasance and nonfeasance." The complaints, which centered around handling of money and mistreatment of clients, were similar to those lodged against Straight's predecessor, The Seed.

The Seed was disbanded in October 1975 amid reports that its peer-pressure tactics subjected teen-agers to intense mental and physical abuse. In 1974, a federal report had likened treatment methods used by The Seed "to highly refined brainwashing techniques employed by the North Koreans during the 1960s."

Most of Straight's creators, its board of directors and staff members came directly from The Seed. But Straight, its supporters said at the time, was going to be different. The emphasis at Straight's rap sessions would be on creating a positive environment of "trust, care, honesty and sincerity."

But in February 1978, reports arose alleging coercive tactics at the program. Former counselors alleged that a youth was threatened with a cocked handgun and others were forcibly detained or threatened with false documents "signed by the police department." Treatment plans were allegedly falsified and, in one instance, former counselors claimed a youth was slapped repeatedly by an executive staff member.

A THREE-MONTH criminal investigation conducted by the Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney's office concluded that some of the allegations were true but there was insufficient evidence to bring criminal charges.

Now, three years later, Straight's troubles are still not over. In its inspection of the program in March, the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) found that Straight was not following state rules on client treatment and record-keeping.

The HRS report indicated that several clients picked at random for interviews said high-level staff members threatened them with court orders which, they were told, would either force them into the Straight program or a mental institution if they did not sign themselves in voluntarily. HRS also said no clients interviewed knew of any process through which they could leave the program. Clients told HRS officials that doors and windows at the homes where they live during the initial phase were locked from the outside so they could not leave. Personal files such as medical histories, treatment plans and psycho-social evaluations were found to be incomplete or inadequately maintained, and Straight was unable to document a training program for its staff.

CONTACTED AFTER the HRS report was released, Straight Executive Director Hartz said he felt "there are some inaccuracies" in the report but declined to discuss any specifics. "We fully wish to comply with state regulations and that is our intent," he said. (A more recent HRS inspection of Straight was conducted in June and Straight's license was renewed for one year. But HRS officials declined to discuss the specific evaluations until a written report is completed.)

Despite its difficulties, Straight has attracted powerful national and local support. Robert DuPont, the founding director of the National Institute for Drug Abuse, last December addressed a banquet of Straight supporters in Tampa and called Straight one of the best drug-abuse treatment centers in the country — a model for others.

The program enjoys strong local support from such powerful names as shopping center developer Mel Sembler, former radio and television station owner Sam G. Rehall and longtime Pinellas developer Joseph Zappala. All three sit on the program's board of directors.

Nonetheless, former clients continue to complain bitterly about the way Straight induced them into its program. And Straight's definition of drug abuse appears to be highly subjective, yet more dogmatic, than that used by others in the field.

## When is drug use drug abuse?

At Straight, any use of drugs is considered to be a problem. "If you talked to us about not taking kids who use recreational drugs because it's not dangerous, I would probably go through the roof as an individual and a professional because I would not want that attributed to me or the program," says Newton.

"I can only give you my opinion," says Hartz. "The program doesn't have a written policy on who is a drug abuser. To me, it's like pregnancy: Either you 'is' or you 'isn't.'"

"... A 14-year-old who did alcohol and pot and never got arrested, never skipped school — that person in our opinion needs to work through his or her relationship to that drug just as much as the person who is 16 and who was out B and K'ing (breaking and entering), ripping off and so on and so forth."

TRYING TO DEFINE drug abuse, says Hartz, who has a bachelor's degree and master's degree in psychology, is "like trying to define schizophrenia. You can't say it's the difference between two and three. It's a subjective type of judgment based upon the chemical dependency model we use here... You learn to identify the problem, but... it's not like going out and reading a thermometer... the answer is a combination of experience, your knowledge base and the fact that we have some literature to review on. And our opinions."

The "chemical dependency model" used at Straight has been adapted by Straight's administrative director, Newton, from a study on adult alcoholism. It lumps all drug use and its effects into one category — a progressive and ultimately fatal "disease of the feelings."

Before joining Straight, Newton, an ordained minister who graduated from Princeton University, was clerk of the Circuit Court in Pasco County, an unsuccessful 1971 candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives and former director of the Florida Alcohol Coalition.

"OUR POSITION is this," says Newton: "Whether we take a kid into the program or not is determined in our judgment by whether the child and the family can handle stopping the (drug) use themselves or whether they need the help of an intensive, therapeutic program to isolate the kid from the peer influence — the availability of drugs..."

That determination is made on the basis of report from parents, school officials, police records, the reputation a teen-ager may have with friends and relative already in the program and the results of a thorough interview known as "intake," to which teen-agers are usually taken by their parents.

It is this intake procedure that some former client criticize most severely. They say that for hours, they were grilled, told they were deviant, worthless human beings and threatened with court orders that would put them in the program and keep them there.

Eventually, they said, they believed it. So they signed themselves in.

NEWTON DENIES any threats of court orders and scoffs at the possibility that some of Straight's clients may have been bullied into the program. "Nobody who has good self-esteem will let it plummet because some body talks to you about your behavior for four, six, 10, 30 hours... We've dealt with 1,800 kids here now, so we've put together a very coherent pattern that is fail-safe."

Other mental health professionals and experts involved in treating drug abusers agree that deciding to send a child to a program like Straight depends on what you consider a drug problem to be. Most distinguish between casual, weekend or "recreational" use of drugs and drug dependency.

David Milchan, a 21-year-veteran of the St. Petersburg Police Department who as head of the Youth Services Division frequently referred families to Straight distinguishes between heavy use of drugs like marijuana and beer and recreational use.

A heavy marijuana user would be "a child using marijuana on a regular basis, a child who says, 'I have to go high in order to function at school or with (my) family,'" says Milchan. He sat on Straight's advisory board until February 1980, when he was reigned from the St. Petersburg Police Department to go work as a juvenile specialist at HRS. He is now police chief of St. Petersburg Beach.

OPERATION PAR also makes a distinction between casual use of drugs like beer and marijuana and abuse of those drugs, says Associate Executive Director Arnold Andrews. For a teen-ager to be admitted to PAR, problems with police, one's family or school must be directly related to drug use, Andrews says.

At PAR, which operates as an outpatient counseling clinic where clients and families come for scheduled appointments and leave, treatment is handled by staff members who have at least two years of college training in counseling.

"They (Straight) deal with white middle- and upper-middle-class kids," says Andrews. "PAR kids are more lower-class, indigent kids."

"People start taking drugs for all different sorts of reasons," says Dr. Anthony Reading, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of South Florida. "There is some correlation to underlying, preexisting emotional problems."

Growing up and being a teen-ager involves all sorts of complex issues — stress, tensions, anxieties, says Dr. Reading. "It's a reasonable assumption that people in general don't get involved or overinvolved with drugs unless they have some kind of emotional problem."

"PROGRAMS LIKE Straight appeal to parents because they don't want to accept responsibility for the children's (drug) problem. Parents can get over-attached to the program because of the fear a parent has someone saying, 'You've been a bad parent.'"

In other words, Straight seems to appeal because its philosophy says that family problems stem from the drug use — not the other way around.

"You need to understand that drug use is a disease initiated by personal choice in response to peer pressure," says Newton in an unpublished treatise on drug abuse. "They (the parents) did not cause their child to use drugs."

The truth is, Dr. Reading adds, "that in dealing with teen-agers, other teen-agers can be very, very effective in changing their behavior... Peer pressure can be very supportive in getting them out and changing them."

Parents whose children have had successful experiences at Straight agree.

"STRAIGHT IS the only drug program provide the services it does for the price," says Charlie Pittman whose son Winston went into the program when he was 16 and is now training to become a staff member. "The price is cheap. You don't get that kind of cooperation unless you get people who really want to help themselves or their kids... Straight isn't for everybody. Straight on works if the family wants it to work."

... Says another parent, "It's not a perfect program, but it's the best game in town. You can say what you want about it, but it does work."

Next: Straight's critics and supporters recall the experiences with the program.



Staff writer Milo Geyelin spent several weeks interviewing former Straight clients, parents, staff members and numerous authorities in law enforcement, psychiatry and drug abuse to compile this report. Recently, he also spent a day at Straight observing the treatment program. Geyelin, 26, has been on the staff of The St. Petersburg Times since October 1979. He was born in Washington, D.C. and attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he majored in history and political science and graduated with distinction in December 1978. Since joining The Times, Geyelin has worked as a general assignment reporter and covered city government and police.

# Drug center holds onto client-restraint policy

By NORMA WAGNER  
Times Staff Writer

PINELLAS PARK — Straight Inc. administrators will continue allowing patients to restrain each other despite warnings from state officials that the practice may be dangerous.

Though a revision of the center's policy says only adult staff members will restrain uncontrollable clients in the future, Straight's vice president of operations said Tuesday that clients will continue to restrain clients in instances of self-defense.

The proposed revisions are in response to a Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) letter mailed Aug. 25 ordering Straight officials to revise their restraint policy before the center's operating license expires Sept. 6. Straight officials mailed the proposed revisions Tuesday.

If the revision is not acceptable, it is possible

HRS will revoke the drug and alcohol treatment center's license, said HRS spokeswoman Elaine Fulton-Jones. "But Straight officials have been negotiating and cooperating with us, so we really don't expect that to be the case," she said.

## Clients will continue to restrain clients in instances of self-defense.

The order, written by HRS program supervisor Martha Lenderman, said, "The (revised) policy must specifically prohibit any physical restriction of movement of clients by other clients. It is the responsibility of staff, not clients, to protect clients from harm by other clients."

Straight's vice president Page Peary said

HRS officials have agreed that in instances of self-defense, clients will be allowed to restrain clients until an adult staff member can take over. He said this always has been Straight's practice and that the HRS order is more in response to change in Florida law.

While Ms. Fulton-Jones acknowledged that the law now requires specific language in such policies, she also said Peary may be misinterpreting the order.

Children restraining children "is our concern and has been our concern and continues to be our concern," she said.

"We've never prescribed (client-to-client) restraint," Perry said. "It has never been part of the treatment of Straight. However, if a young person slugs another young person, we have to stop that. But that's not restraint, that's self-defense."

August 30, 1989 St. Pete Times Page 36

## Growing Straight Inc. remains controversial

During their first weeks at Straight, boys are held by their left loops as they are escorted around the premises. Girls are taken by their hands.



Photo by JOE TONELLI

**The teen-age drug-abuse therapy program, say some parents and former clients, is something close to divine salvation; others say it borders on brainwashing**

■ Straight Inc., a controversial drug-abuse treatment program for teen-agers, is approaching its fifth anniversary of operation in Pinellas County. This story, the first of two parts, examines Straight's method of therapy. ■

By MILO GEVELIN  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Almost every weekday morning it's the same. As commuters on the way to work cruise by a squat, sand-colored concrete building at 3001 Gandy Blvd., a chorus of teen-age voices rises from somewhere inside. The voices all sing the same song — a song that, like it or not, will set the tone for the rest of the day:

✕ *I'm here at Straight, feeling great;  
From nine to nine, I'm feeling fine.*

Nobody inside will be going anywhere for a while. Straight Inc., a drug rehabilitation center for teen-agers, will soon be in its sixth year of operation in Pinellas County. With a new branch successfully opened in Sarasota last fall, another expected to open in Atlanta this summer and still more being considered in Cincinnati and Washington, D.C., the program is attracting a national following.

But its philosophy — that if peer pressure can get kids

into trouble with drugs, peer pressure can get them "straight" — remains controversial.

STRAIGHT CALLS its therapy "re-acclimation" — the process of "relearning the values, rules and behavior of the main culture."

In the opinion of some parents and former clients, the therapy program is something close to divine salvation. Other parents and former clients say it borders on brainwashing.

Straight's therapy is based on the theory that teen-agers who use drugs — most commonly marijuana and alcohol — can't be helped unless they are totally removed from the influences that encourage them to use drugs, says Straight Administrative Director Miller Newton.

Conventional counseling by psychologists or psychiatrists doesn't work with kids on drugs, Newton says, because "you cannot isolate the kid from the peer pressure that has (use of drugs) implicit in it." The way teen-age drug users dress, the way they talk, the music they like, their values — all these carry a message that Straight contends is unconventional, powerful and destructive.

See STRAIGHT, 6-B

## **Police probe clears officer in allegation about drug program**

An internal St. Petersburg Police investigation has cleared Officer Ronald K. Hartz of any wrongdoing in connection with an incident at the Straight Inc. juvenile drug treatment program last year.

Hartz did not exceed his authority when he told a Straight client about what could happen if the youth continued to resist program officials, said Police Chief Mack M. Vines.

In a copyrighted article last February, *The St. Petersburg Times* quoted several former Straight counselors who said the drug program used a variety of coercive — perhaps illegal — tactics to control clients.

One counselor said he saw Hartz threaten to arrest a youth who wanted to leave the program, as was the youth's legal right. In the article, Officer Hartz denied the counselor's charge.

Police investigators questioned the youth allegedly involved, and the youth denied being threatened by the officer.

Straight's executive director is James E. Hartz — the uncle of Officer Hartz. In recent months, the drug program has been under investigation by several state agencies and Pinellas-Pasco State Atty. James T. Russell.



**JAMES E. HARTZ**  
... heads Straight Inc.

## Complaints against youth drug program being investigated

By **WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM**  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

State health officials are investigating charges that several juveniles have been "beaten" and "slapped ... around" while enrolled in Pinellas County's newest drug-treatment program.

The examination of Straight Inc., a non-profit organization partly supported by federal funds, stems mainly from articles earlier this month in *The St. Petersburg Times*, officials said last week.

**ANOTHER** complaint was lodged by Pinellas school officials, who claimed that one of their students had been mistreated while at Straight, officials said.

If the charges are confirmed, Straight could lose its operating license, according to Bob Marshall, district director of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

"I think there's some doubt among some people (about Straight) because of the news articles, and we're obligated to clear the air one way or another," he said.

But after several days of investigation, Marshall said that so far "those allegations (of mistreatment) have not been substantiated at all.

"If my son needed to go into the Straight program I'd put him there right now," he said.

**BASED IN A** northwest St. Petersburg warehouse, Straight uses peer-pressure behavioral modification methods on juveniles from 12 to 18. Only those with admitted or suspected drug problems can enroll.

On several occasions, Pinellas County judges have ordered juveniles into Straight, rather than to jail.

Thus far, nearly 50 program clients have been questioned by state investigators, Marshall said.

But the officials have not finished interviewing six former corporate directors who resigned several months ago to protest Straight's treatment and management techniques.

Some of the directors have accused the program of violating state law. A former adult program volunteer also told *The Times* that she once witnessed Helen Peter-

mann, Straight's program director, kick a youth who was passively resisting counselors. Straight officials have denied the charges.

James E. Hartz, Straight's chief executive, declined to comment last week about the investigation.

"If there's one thing I've learned, it's that I'm not going to talk to a reporter over the telephone," he told *The Times*.

But Hartz also declined to meet personally with the reporter before this article was to be published.

**ONE OF THE** newspaper articles prompting the state's investigation quoted Jerry Wess Vancil, 17, of St. Petersburg. The youth claimed to have been "beaten and bruised" by six Straight counselors — all under 18 — during an intensive-treatment session unsupervised by any adult.

The youth also supplied *The Times* with a sworn statement outlining the incident and identifying the counselors involved.

Marshall said HRS officials may be unable to contact Vancil, who reportedly has left Florida, before the investigation ends later this week.

"That's the kind of kid we need to trail (locate)," Marshall said. "He may be right."

Social service programs frequently are accused of mistreating clients, Marshall said. "Sometimes it's true, sometimes it's false." But the Straight investigation has not revealed "any serious situations that have alarmed us," he said.

**"I'M TALKING** about serious problems (such as physical mistreatment) that would make it such that children should not be in the program," Marshall said.

If any mistreatment reports are verified, he said, they will be referred to Pinellas-Pasco State Atty. James T. Russell for possible criminal prosecution.

The five-member investigative committee is led by James Holly, the drug program licensing official who has been overseeing Straight since it opened in the fall of 1976. The group will start compiling its report Tuesday. Marshall and Hartz are scheduled to meet Friday and review the findings.

# Drug program fears jury award will result in its financial ruin

By MIKE COPELAND  
Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Straight Inc. will be financially "devastated" unless a \$721,000 judgment against the drug treatment program is overturned, a spokeswoman for the program has predicted.

Jurors awarded the money Thursday to Karen Norton, who sued over abuse she said she suffered during her 17-month stay in the controversial drug treatment program eight years ago. Norton, 25, said she was held against her will in the program in 1982 and 1983.

There is no way of telling how many former patients may eventually sue over treatment methods that spokeswoman Joy Margolis says Straight no longer uses.

If others sue and juries are inclined to make similarly huge awards, Margolis said, "no organization could continue to sustain it."

What's more, bad publicity causes patient admissions to slack off, she said. And the non-profit organization relies heavily on client fees to maintain its financial stability, Margolis said.

"If you draw it to its logical conclusion," she said, "a lot of kids won't receive treatment."

Straight will appeal the jury's award, Margolis said.

Of \$721,000 awarded, \$615,000 was earmarked by jurors specifically as punishment for "malice, moral turpitude, wantonness and recklessness."

Margolis said Straight's insurance company will not pay such damages. So the drug treatment program may be forced to scare up some fast cash.

Norton's lawyers estimate that Straight's assets — including real estate in Cincinnati, St. Petersburg, Orlando and Atlanta — total between \$2.1 and \$2.7 million.

But Straight doesn't own most of that property outright, and the buildings aren't even marketable since they were specially designed as drug treatment centers, William Rutger, Straight's lawyer, said last week.

Senior Judge Joseph P. McNulty, who presided over the two-week trial that concluded Thursday, is entitled to review the jury's award to decide if it should stand.

McNulty said he can reduce the award if he is convinced it is excessive. But Norton could opt for a new trial rather than accept any reduction, McNulty said.

Norton was once offered \$7,500 to settle the 5-year-old lawsuit — an offer she refused, according to Karen Barnett, one of Norton's lawyers.

Over the last decade, Straight has agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars in settlements to former patients who complained of being held against their will. One former patient was awarded \$220,000 in 1983

in a federal lawsuit.

But this week's jury award is the largest in Straight's history. Jurors concluded the organization was liable for assault and battery, false imprisonment, negligence and intentional infliction of emotional distress in Norton's case.

"Not only are we paying for the sins of people in the past," Margolis said, "but it's even worse because they are not paying."

Norton complained in her lawsuit that she was thrown against a wall by Virgil Miller Newton, a minister who once ran Straight's St. Petersburg program.

Newton has since run controversial drug treatment programs in Texas and New Jersey. Those programs have gotten into trouble with local officials in both states because of allegations of abuse of patients.

Margolis said Straight's eight treatment programs — each of which serves about 100 clients — are no longer the places they once were.

The organization, headquartered in St. Petersburg, evolved in the early 1970s from another drug treatment program called The Seed.

Over the years, Straight has gotten into hot water for using patients to restrain other patients and for holding patients in the program against their will.

The combination of emotional purging and rigid rules Straight uses has caused some critics to accuse the program of brainwashing.

The long-term program treats 12- to 21-year-olds by using intense peer pressure, rigid house rules and counseling methods similar to those used by Alcoholics Anonymous. Patients spend their days in large and small counseling groups, and their evenings in homes with other Straight patients.

Despite the criticism, Straight boasts a 65 percent success rate, considered extremely high for a drug rehabilitation program.

Straight's St. Petersburg program was accredited two years ago by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, a 39-year-old independent commission that scrutinizes hospitals and mental health treatment programs.

Margolis said each of Straight's programs is now accredited. Its board of directors includes the names of United States ambassadors and prominent local developers Melvin Sembler and Joseph Zappala.

Straight had a run-in last year with the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) over a state report that said patients only had limited use of an abuse hot line, bathroom privileges were restricted, and some records were sloppy or incomplete.

But Straight's state license has since been renewed twice with no serious problems, according to HRS files.

## Straight sues client families

■ The drug program wants unpaid fees; some families answer that they and their children were abused and they won't pay.

By DAVID BARSTOW  
Times Staff Writer

In April 1987, Richard and Susan Ferris checked their 16-year-old son into Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg for drug treatment.

Months later Richard Ferris Jr. ran away from both the program and the "host family" where Straight clients live during the early phase of treatment.

He told his parents he left because he had been seduced by his host mother, Mrs. Ferris said in an interview.

"I hate that organization like you can't believe," she said.

Her anger only increased when Straight sued her and her husband in October 1990, claiming they still owed \$1,089 for their son's drug treatment.

"How can we pay you for services not rendered?" Mrs. Ferris says she told Straight officials. "Look how you've screwed up his mind."

The Ferrises are not alone in their legal problems with Straight. In the last 10 months, Straight has sued at least 80 families in Pinellas courts for failing to fully pay for their childrens drug treatment, court records show.

Straight officials say the wave of suits are

Please see **STRAIGHT 7B**



Susan Ferris says her son said his "host mother" seduced him.





STEVE OTTO

## Bottling cologne for politicians might raise stink

Eau de Guava? I don't think so. You do learn some things back here in BayLife that you wouldn't find just by reading the front section of the paper.

For one, you get a sense of style and what you have to wear if you are going to be part of the "now generation," as opposed to being a part of the "not-now generation," which I was before I got here.

For one thing, I learned in a story last week that apparently you are not a real celebrity unless you have your own personal scent. I don't mean you actually have to smell different, you just have to be able to market it.

Maybe you saw the story that listed some of the celebrities, along with their scents.

There was Mikhail Baryshnikov with one called "Misha."

Another biggie was Elizabeth Taylor's "Passion." "Be touched by the fragrance that touches the woman," the advertisement said.

I don't know if that means they put stuff all over Elizabeth Taylor before they sell it or what, but it must be expensive.

Some of them seemed to fit the celebrity. One titled "Cher Uninhibited" was labeled as being "Dramatically sensual... Like the woman herself. An enticement to take the risk."

I don't know what a quart of "Cher Uninhibited" costs, but I think we're on the cutting edge of something here.

Not that all Americans are risk-takers. But one thing we definitely are is label-happy. We wear jeans with someone else's name on them. In fact, it's better if someone else's name is on them.

Someone gave me a sweater that I figure costs about five times what that same sweater would cost if it didn't have someone's name stitched on the front, and it's not even my name.

We freely advertise soft drinks, events, rock bands and tourist traps on T-shirts. Bumper stickers tell you more than you want to know about the kinds of people who are out there driving on the same road as you are.

### You are what you smell like

So what's wrong with giving off the scent of someone you want people to associate you with?

So far, they seem to have limited this scent idea to artsy sorts of stars, but this thing could catch fire.

Why not world leaders? What about a fragrance called "By George — the Cologne Thing for Non-Wimps." Or, if you can't afford the No. 1 brand, why not "Quayle Hunt — It looks good."

Those with a global view might want to impress their friends by wearing "Mikhail — a disarmingly heady mixture of borsch, glassnost and tanks."

For those who will not be in close company, there is always "Arafat — a different aroma of damp towels and desert dust."

Stars would be a natural. Say you are off. Before heading out to the first tee, you might want to splash on some "Big Jack — a delightful mix of the locker room and a wet sand trap."

If football is your thing, why not a brand touting your favorite team. One cologne might be "Buc Orange — it smells, too."

There could be perfumes and colognes for everyone, to fit every occupation. If you run a restaurant, why not a perfume that smells like onions and garlic cooking.



Tribune photograph by TODD L. CHAPPEL

Skip Crowder, a recovering crack addict, was forced into treatment by his parents, Ronnie and Jimmie, background, who obtained a court order.

## Tough love, hard decisions

Faced with drug addiction in family and friends, some people make a blunt declaration: Get treatment or go to jail.

By SUZIE SIEGEL  
Tribune Staff Writer

TAMPA — One woman holds her head in her hands as if it might fall off. A father and son look everywhere except at each other. Another woman smiles warmly at her mother and grandmother, even though they have just accused her of being a prostitute and crack addict.

Chief Judge Dennis Alvarez sees every reaction on Wednesday mornings, when people troop into the Hillsborough County Courthouse, asking him to force a relative or friend into drug treatment.

Florida has a law, similar to the Baker Act for the mentally ill, that allows addicts to be ordered into treatment against their will.

But the 1971 law was virtually unused until recently, said Tom Oik, who chairs a group studying involuntary treatment. Procedures vary among counties, he said, and some have no policies at all.

In Hillsborough, Alvarez hears the cases in his chambers. Florida law books line one end of the room. At the other sits the law personified: the judge in his flowing black robe.

One recent morning, he took jail inmates first so others would see what happens to those who disobey his orders.

People who skip a hearing or refuse evaluation or treatment can be sentenced to six months in jail or a juvenile detention center for contempt of court. They usually go through treatment there and then continue counseling on the outside until urine tests show they are no longer using drugs.

A 31-year-old woman had been in jail nearly three months. Her mother, who had been caring for her 2-year-old grandchild, said her daughter could return home if she got treatment.

"I think the baby needs her, and I need help with the baby," said the woman, 74, clutching a tissue in her hand.

The judge warned the defendant that he will call the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) if she neglects the baby. The court petition said



Tribune photograph by BRUCE JOHNSON

Judge Dennis Alvarez handles all the Hillsbor-

## Court-forced drug treatment saved son, parents say

By SUZIE SIEGEL  
Tribune Staff Writer

TAMPA — Except for the length of his dark blond hair and the two silver earrings in each ear, Skip Crowder resembles a dream come true for most parents. He hammers on home-repair projects, reads the Bible with his family and plans to start college next month.

He also must go to court for the sixth time in less than two years. He cannot wait.

"This will be the first time I've walked out of the courthouse on my own," said Crowder, with a cheerful honesty so different from the sullen months when he lied about his addiction to crack.

His parents went to court to force him into treatment. They stuck by their decision even when he refused help and got thrown in jail, not once, but three times.

Eventually, he straightened out. He has stayed clean eight months now, and he hopes to have his parents' court petition dismissed in May. Dennis Alvarez, chief judge of Hillsborough County, said the 20-year-old has made a remarkable turnaround.

"I knew he was heading toward the morgue," said his mother, Ronnie Crowder. "Thank God for the petition. It saved his life."

The Crowders went through civil court, and thus Skip has no criminal record, despite his jail time. He's glad he got help before turning to crime. A criminal record would have hurt his chances for a decent career, he said.

### Tough decision

The Crowders recommend that parents go to court as soon as possible, but they admit the decision isn't easy. Tears filled Jimmie Crowder's eyes as he recalled his son's hateful looks in court.

As the ordeal stretched on, Jimmie resented missing work to take Skip to treatment or court. He resented weekends spent visiting Skip in jail. He said

# Family credits forced treatment with getting son off of drugs

■ From Page 1F

"She was the real rock that kept the family together," he said. "To me, an addict was just a weak person. But since this has all happened, I've been taught it's a disease."

Still struggling to understand, he turned to Skip. "You must have wondered if you were hurting your Mom and Dad."

Skip shrugged helplessly. "When you're high, nothing else matters."

His mother felt hurt that Jimmie could not understand their son the way she did. But she said Jimmie had no experience with addictive behavior. She did.

"My Daddy was an alcoholic," she said. "He was a good man when he was sober."

Skip is her child from her first marriage, but Jimmie adopted him as a baby. Although Jimmie brought five sons to the marriage, they were much older, and Skip was the only child at home in his teens.

Because he attended a private Christian school, he wore shorter hair and dressier clothes than other teenagers in the blue-collar neighborhood. He had to come in early while they stayed out past midnight. Some taunted him as a "mama's boy."

"My mother was strict," Ronnie said. "I always said I wouldn't be strict. But I was."

Skip said he began smoking marijuana at age 14 to feel more accepted by his peers. His parents had enrolled him in private school to avoid bad influences in public school. But he said his school friends smoked marijuana, and one introduced him to crack in the summer of 1988.

"The more you smoked, the more you wanted. You stay high for only a few seconds, but the high is very high."

## The downhill slide

Once an honor-roll student, he dropped out in the 11th grade and got his general equivalency degree (GED).

Skip had seemed happy and outgoing, his mother said. "He always wanted to please us." But on crack, he became withdrawn. "He never told a lie before. After drugs, you couldn't believe anything he said."

He had been meticulous about his appearance, sometimes showering several times a day.

"He got to be where he didn't care what he looked like, what he smelled like," Jimmie said. His weight dropped to 108 pounds, leaving him a scraggly skeleton at 5-foot-8.

"He was death warmed over," Ronnie said.

He would disappear for as long as a week. One night he slept in an old church bus abandoned beside a road. Another night he curled up in a closet in an apartment complex laundry.

The Crowders bought Skip a car at age 16. Whenever they took his keys, he stole bikes to get around. Once he borrowed his father's truck and returned with the windows smashed.

He had bought crack from guys hanging out on 22nd Street in Ybor City, where he usually went. As he pulled away, a rock crashed through his back window and cracked the front windshield.

He described a world where young dealers openly flagged down cars, where they pulled up their shirts to show the gun shoved in their waistband.

"They often took your money and gave you nothing. What could you do?"

To buy crack, he pawned his gold necklace, watch, ring, radio and stereo equipment. Then he stole his father's diamond pinkie ring.

Ronnie found the pawn slip on



Tribune photograph by TODD L. CHAPPEL

Skip Crowder and his mother, Ronnie, spend a quiet moment together reading the Bible.

Skip's dresser in September 1988, confirming her suspicion that he was on drugs. The Crowders drove him to CareUnit, a private drug treatment program in Tampa, that night. They spent hours convincing him to stay.

A counselor recommended they file a court petition the next day. At first, Skip didn't take the court seriously. He thought treatment was simply a nuisance to tolerate until he could return to the streets.

He completed a 56-day program at CareUnit. Nearly two months later, he started smoking again. The court let his parents try Straight Inc., a non-profit treatment program in St. Petersburg.

Skip joked that CareUnit, with its comfort and recreation, resembled a Holiday Inn while the strict and sparse Straight was like the Bates Motel in the movie "Psycho."

He walked out of Straight after 40 days. His parents found him hiding in the back yard, stoned. They dragged him back to court.

"By this time, the judge was getting kind of peeved," Skip said.

## The shock of jail

Alvarez sent him to jail for contempt of court. He was released after a month to enter outpatient counseling at the non-profit DACC (Drug Abuse Comprehensive Coordinating Office). He left after nine days, got high, returned to court and was ordered into a five-week treatment program in jail.

Afterward, the family went on vacation to Disney World, the mountains of North Carolina and his grandmother's home in Fort Walton Beach.

"The whole time I was thinking about getting high," Skip said.

As soon as he got home, he ran off with a camera and video-cassette recorder, in search of crack. Alvarez had him arrested and thrown in jail.

"He cried in court," said Chris Howland, a court liaison for DAC-

CO. "He just seemed desperate over his addiction."

Skip said he thought of suicide. He told a guard and before he knew it, he was stripped, wrapped in a paper robe and strapped to a bed for the weekend until a psychiatrist could talk to him.

"I realized I had to do more with my life."

He went to Charter Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital in Tampa, for three weeks, then into family counseling. He gives counselor Lou Anez and pastor Rapley Armstrong much of the credit for his recovery. Armstrong had often visited him in jail.

"He knew Skip had the Lord in him," Ronnie said.

At first, the court required random drug tests once a week. He's now down to one a month.

"He's always upbeat now," Howland said. "He's on the home-stretch."

The family does things together that would have been inconceivable a year ago. They dine out nearly every night. They attend church on Sunday, sometimes twice, and often return on Wednesday night. Once a heavy metal fan, Skip now prefers country music, and he and his parents went to a recent "Alabama" concert.

Over the years, the Crowders have added rooms and luxuries, such as a spa and deck, onto their modest north Tampa home. Skip has replaced the screens around the pool and next plans to redo the shed floor.

"He's always working around the house without me asking," Ronnie said.

He's also building a doghouse for his first pet, a basset hound named Bozo that he got for his birthday in January. Skip has no doubt he will stay straight as more birthdays come and go.

"I don't even think of it," he said. "The closest I get to drugs is taking a vitamin each morning."

# 17-year-old 'escapee' says he was 'beaten' for not cooperating



**Jerry Vancil:** 'They just kept on screaming and yelling.'

The message wasn't getting through to Jerry Vancil, and it began to frustrate those around him.

One day last October, counselors at Straight Inc. decided to try a different technique to reach the 17-year-old — a method used only in unusual cases.

That decision has now raised questions — and accusations.

"I think it was on a weekend, Saturday or something," the youth recalls. "I was just slouching down in my chair and wouldn't pay attention, and I told them I wouldn't sing their songs."

On that day, Jerry kept breaking the rules, deliberately, "so they took me in the back room."

**JERRY SAYS** he was "beaten" by six Straight counselors and clients, one 18, the rest 17. It is something program rules strictly forbid:

The other youths say "no physical violence" was used. But they acknowledge taking part in an intensive shouting and prodding session. One boy says, "It was a kind of a type of therapy. Some couldn't handle it, like Jerry."

The two versions almost match perfectly. But the Straight counselors disagree with Jerry's definition of being "beaten."

A belligerent attitude characterized Jerry's three-month stay in Straight, Pineallas County's new drug rehabilitation program. He contends that he resisted from the first day his mother enrolled him, along with his sister Edith, 16. (A younger brother also is enrolled.)

They were among the juveniles who for 12 hours a day underwent Straight's peer-pressure methods of behavior modification — until Jerry and Edith "escaped."

**BASED IN** a warehouse in northwest St. Petersburg, Straight is a private corporation that has been praised by judges, parents and youth officials throughout the county.

But Jerry doesn't think the praise is deserved and wanted his story told by *The St. Petersburg Times*.

Two things are important to note here.

Jerry is no "typical teenager." He has divorced parents, little interest in school, a taste for marijuana and a criminal record of auto theft, breaking and entering and aggravated assault.

But neither are the Straight counselors typical professionals. James E. Hartz, Straight's 29-year-old director, has a degree in clinical psychology. But he has no prior experience in drug rehabilitation work. His 14 youth counselors are themselves former problem teenagers, either graduates of Straight or senior clients generally not much older than those they treat. Program Director Helen R. Petermann is the only other adult on the staff, and she has no former drug therapy training. There are also several adult volunteer workers.

One of the youths "took me back in the chair, and everybody was standing there," he remembers, adding, "Don got a hold of my right arm and Dave got a hold of my left arm."

"He (Jerry) needed some help getting

his feelings out," one counselor says.

"Feeling that guilt, that's what keeps you going," says another. "If you don't feel guilty about doing something you keep doing it."

Several girls, all Straight clients, were in the room, and Jerry says they began to yell at him, things like "If you get out you'd probably go be a fag" and "Think you're Joe Stud?"

"They just kept on screaming and yelling," he says.

Two boys "were yelling in my ears that 'you're killing your mom because you won't work (cooperate with the program).'"

"First we talked to him, then we yelled at him and tried to make him feel guilty," recalls a counselor.

"I started saying 'Jerry, what's wrong with you?' I was tapping him (his chest) with my finger," says another.

Jerry was being blitzed from all sides.

"One kid would sit there for five minutes and shout in his ear, 'How does it feel not to care about your mom?'" a counselor says. "Just hitting him with reality from everywhere. He knew it was for his own good."

"They were hitting me in my stomach and my chest at the same time," says Jerry. A few minutes later the girls left. "Then they (the boys) really started punching me," he says. "Twice as hard."

"Yeah, it hurt. God, just pain, and in the same place, too — a lot."

One counselor says, "There were no fists. We were just kind of patting him with our hands."

Jerry says his left arm, locked in a wrestling hold by one boy, began to numb. "I couldn't feel anything in my hand," he says. "I cried, 'cause after awhile the pain in my chest was really hurting bad, and . . . they cut the circulation all the way up to my fingers."

The others remember Jerry crying, not out of pain, but out of relief that his emotions had been opened.

At one point Jerry says a boy "smacked me in my face, you know, he hits me that way, really

hard with the open hand."

"Nobody hit him," one youth insists. "Nobody does that. He was swinging at people."

After about half an hour Jerry says the youths backed off. One tossed a pillow in his face, urging him to hit it. "They said, 'Hit the pillow, just get out all your frustrations,'" he says. "I said, 'No, I'm not gonna hit no one.'"

"It's frustrating (working with clients like Jerry), but we didn't take our frustrations out on him," one youth insists.

As the session ended, Jerry says he was mystified: "They came up and put their arms around me and said 'We'll, we love you, we just want you to stay here, we don't want you to go out there and kill yourself.'"

"I was saying 'Yeah, look what you're doing to me in here. I was saying that in my head.'"

Jerry rejoined the other clients. He said he was sore and swollen from the session and asked for an ice pack to hold on his chest. One of the youths remembers getting it for him.

On Oct. 27, about three weeks after the treatment, Jerry says he "escaped" from Straight and left Florida, hoping never to return. (Edith has since run away, too, and plans to join Jerry.)

The day after his escape, one counselor and three Straight graduates went looking for him. (Program director Hartz says he doesn't authorize such search parties, "but they do a good job.")

When they reached Jerry's old north St. Petersburg apartment complex it was about midnight, one of the youths says. They began questioning neighbors about Jerry's whereabouts.

**ONE NEIGHBOR** says the boys told her they were from "the state attorney's office." When she refused to answer their questions, she says they threatened to return with a search warrant.

Program director Hartz says the session with Jerry was an accepted treatment designed to pull the juvenile through a wide range of emotions.

"THE GOAL is very simple," he says. "It's to get the kid to start feeling guilt for what he has done. A kid's got to get in touch with what he's done, and he's got to make amends for it." He says counselors try to balance the use of guilt with love.

Hartz was not in the room. Nor was any other adult. If someone proved that his counselors acted wrongly, he says he would act. But it is Jerry's word against theirs.

Hartz thinks Jerry is concocting the tale to get back at Straight.

If there was a fight, he says, "I'll lay you odds that Vancil initiated it, because Vancil does not like to be confined in a small area . . . at all."

Guilt — "adversive reinforcement" such as was administered to Jerry — can be effective if used along with positive treatments, says Dr. James M. Anker, chairman of the Psychology Department at the University of South Florida.

But professionals use it with "great care," Anker says. "We want to make sure someone isn't working out his own problems (on the patient)," he says. "If they (Straight) capitalize on this guilt thing, I would be uneasy."

St. Petersburg Times

Publication Date: 5/10/87

Page: 1D

HD: Drug treatment program isn't answer for every child

BY: DAVID FINKEL

SE: Going Straight

EX: ""Drug treatment is different. This is not a normal world.""

- Bill Oliver, executive director of the Straight Foundation

It was 16 months ago when Bill Oliver said that to me, and in the time since I have come to realize he is right.

At Straight, drug treatment is different.

At Straight, the world is not a normal place at all.

For a series of stories that were published last week in the St. Petersburg Times, I followed the progress of a drug-dependent teen-ager from the time he first entered Straight on March 31, 1986 to the time he left a year later. He left a success. The program worked wonders for him. Yet even on his last day, his time of personal triumph, a question kept nagging at me.

The question: If the time came, would I ever put my child in Straight?

The answer: I don't know.

It's an answer that amazes me because when I began researching the stories, my answer at that point would have been a flat out no. Then I began observing the methods of Straight as closely as any outsider has ever seen them. In the young man I followed, whose name is Paul Kulek, I saw phenomenal changes.

When he entered the program, he was two days shy of his 16th birthday. He was a small, skinny boy lacking in self-confidence, and his troubles with drugs ran deep. A year later when he left the program, he had stopped using drugs, he was getting along with his parents, he had goals and high hopes.

But one success doesn't mean an entire program is perfect, and some of the things I saw over the past year left me convinced that Straight is imperfect in many ways.

There is high turnover among the staff. In its defense, Straight says that in such an intensive program, turnover should be expected. But in the past year Straight has had three different directors. That seems like a lot in a program where a child's rehabilitation depends in large part on routine and continuity.

At lower staff levels, turnover was also high: At one point while I was following Paul, the program seemed bloated with staff members who knew the goals of the program and could recite the theories behind them, but didn't seem to understand what makes those theories work.

""Why do you sing that particular song?"" I once asked a staff member after hearing a roomful of teen-agers sing ""Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah"" in a slow, awkward cadence.

""I don't know. We've always done it that way,"" was his reply.

If my child had been in the program, that answer wouldn't have been good enough for me.

There is an extraordinary emphasis on the role of parents.

One of the more commendable aspects of Straight is that it seeks to heal an entire family, not just the child with a drug dependency. The problem is that at some point in the program, most families become ""host homes,"" which means other young people in the program come to

live with them, getting support and guidance in the process. For the Kuleks, being a host home was one of the more rewarding parts of the program, but the Kuleks are exceptional: Their marriage is strong, and they give off the sense that they're in control.

This isn't true of some of the other parents whose children are in the program. In many cases, it is their behavior that has alienated a child into drug use, and it would bother me greatly if my child spent time in such a home. To have my child turn to such a troubled parent for help - a parent with no professional counseling skills and distorted emotions - could be ruinous.

There are problems with communication. At one point, Paul came within a heartbeat of being expelled from Straight.

Written off as unsalvageable by Straight's then-associate director, Paul was sent away from the program, and only the last-minute intervention of the director, who had taken a special interest in Paul, allowed him to return. Paul got another chance and proved so successful he is now in training to join the staff; how many other kids were sent home and not given a second chance to come back?

Another time, just after Paul entered the program, the group sang an old spiritual song in which the lyrics could be construed as racist. Asked about it, a senior staff member conceded the song could be considered offensive and said it would be sung no more. Yet toward the end of Paul's program, the song was still being sung often enough that all the people in the program had memorized the words; when asked why, the staff member said he didn't know.

There are other peculiarities of the program: There is the inanity of the entire group saying "Love you" to whoever has just finished speaking, as if saying such a thing by routine could make a person feel warm and wanted.

There is the oddity of "motivating," the process of stabbing a hand in the air to be called on to speak. More than once, I saw kids motivate to a point that seemed painful, only to have a discussion leader egg them on to try even harder by saying, "Motivating is what separates winners from losers."

There is the "whiteness" of the program. Of the 233 people who were admitted to Straight from the time Paul began the program to the time he finished, only a handful were black. Almost all were white and from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds. If Straight is, as it contends, one of the country's most successful drug-treatment programs, it should figure out ways to make its methods available to a wider segment of the population.

Perhaps surprisingly, my biggest complaint isn't concerned with the allegations of brainwashing and cultism that have surrounded Straight since its inception. Straight, I've decided, may be peculiar, but a cult it isn't; while a cult seeks to isolate its members, Straight's ultimate goal is to return them to society.

Instead, my complaint is with Straight's insistence that it be allowed to hold people under 18 against their will, as long as their parent or guardian gives approval. To me, this isn't only unnecessary, it's also potentially abusive.

Straight, after all, is a business. It may have nonprofit status, but it also has visions of expanding. In 11 years, it has grown from one treatment center in Pinellas County to eight in seven states, and by the end of 1988, officials hope to have the number up to 13.

All of this takes money. All of this takes a bank account that is growing rather than shrinking. Straight may insist its motives are pure and its screening process for potential clients the best, but these are fat times in drug rehabilitation. What about the slow times? What might happen when the blue chairs of Straight are empty and the bills need to be paid? Would Straight relax its admission standards to increase

business?

All of this then, is why I don't know if I would put my child in Straight. When I try to figure out the answer, I find myself thinking about three things:

First - the Kuleks. They are a healed family. Straight, they say, is the best thing that ever happened to them.

Second - a phone call I received recently from a woman in tears. Six years ago, she said, she tried to get her son in Straight - or any other drug-treatment program - but was turned down because she had no money or insurance. "I was on the phone for almost a week," she said. "I went to church groups. I swore I would pay back the money. I begged." She got no help, though, and six years later her son is still out on the streets, high as can be, out of control. There is a horror to drug abuse, she said weeping, that can't even be imagined.

Third - what I've seen.

What, then, would I do with my child?

I know I never want to become the woman on the phone. I also know chances are good my child would emerge from Straight as healthy as Paul did.

But from what I have seen in the past year, I know too that putting her in would be the last step I would take.

I wouldn't put her in if her drug use were experimental. I wouldn't put her in if she were doing nothing more than smoking pot or drinking. The program is severe. It changes lives. If I were certain she did need help, I would try counselors, I would try less demanding programs, I would try anything. Only then, if all of those things failed, might I try Straight as a final attempt.

SC: PERSPECTIVE

PG: 1D

AT: analysis drug\$

SU: Straight, Incorporated

TY: SERIES; COLUMN

ED: CITY

# Memorandum



To : SAC, TAMPA (209B-TP-28810) (PRA) (P) Date 6/11/93

From : SA [REDACTED]

Subject: [REDACTED]

STRAIGHT, INC.,  
GANDY BOULEVARD,  
ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA;  
FBW - INSURANCE;  
OO: TAMPA

Referenced investigation was predicated upon information from the UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE (USAO), Middle District of Florida (MDF), Tampa, Florida, regarding a Civil Action against [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] During this civil matter the USAO received a compliant of allegations of insurance fraud. Investigation to date indicates that administrators of STRAIGHT, INC. were double billing the clients admitted to the program. Upon admissions, the parents of the children were required to make payment to STRAIGHT, INC. and also assign their insurance claims to STRAIGHT, INC. Administrators at STRAIGHT, INC. would then bill the insurance company and fail to reimburse the family members from these insurance profits. The money was utilized for payroll and office operating capital for STRAIGHT, INC. as well as personal expenditures of the management team.

STRAIGHT FOUNDATION is the holding company for STRAIGHT, INC. and does maintain all the assets for this corporation. STRAIGHT INC. was responsible for the rehabilitation and treatment of the clients. The subjects of this investigation are the Executive Staff for STRAIGHT, INC. It has not been determined whether or not individuals or members of STRAIGHT FOUNDATION participated in this fraud. In addition, it would be premature to ascertain the forfeiture potential of STRAIGHT, INC. and STRAIGHT FOUNDATION's properties. Prior to the property being sold, those individuals responsible for the sale of the property should be identified.

(2) - Tampa  
CFB:tar  
(2) [Signature]

209B-TP-28810-17

SEARCHED [ ] INDEXED [ ]  
SERIALIZED [ ] FILED [ ]

JUN 1 1993

FBI-TAMPA



wlc sent

209  
196B-TP-28810

The subjects involved in this investigation, to date,  
include

b6  
b7C

2\*



# Memorandum



To : SAC, TAMPA (196B-TP-28810) (PRA) (P) Date 5/21/93

From : SA [redacted]

b6  
b7C

Subject: [redacted]

ET AL;  
STRAIGHT, INCORPORATED,  
GANDY BOULEVARD,  
ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA;  
FRAUD BY WIRE - INSURANCE;  
OO: TAMPA

The purpose of this memo is to request that a sub file be created to serve as a repository for all insurance billing statements in the above referenced matter.

②-Tampa  
CFB:lm  
(2)gr

20910-TP-28810-18  
SEARCHED INDEXED  
SERIALIZED FILED  
MAY 21 1993

b6  
b7C

wlc sent

## FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Date of transcription 5/25/93

[redacted] White female, date of birth [redacted] Social Security Account Number [redacted] was advised of the identity of the interviewing Agent and the purpose for the interview. [redacted] then made available the following information:

b6  
b7C

[redacted] became acquainted with STRAIGHT INCORPORATED in [redacted] when she admitted her son [redacted] into this facility [redacted] who was 15 years old upon his admission at STRAIGHT INCORPORATED, remained at the facility until [redacted] when [redacted] pulled him out of the program because of physical abuse. In [redacted]

b6  
b7C

[redacted] her son was exhibiting uncontrollable and uncooperative behavior. When [redacted] son arrived home under the influence of alcohol, she became extremely frightened and panicked [redacted] On one evening when her son was giving her extreme difficulty, she contacted HRS, who advised her to call STRAIGHT INCORPORATED. [redacted] did telephonically contact a counselor at STRAIGHT in [redacted] and was advised that she should come to the facility with her son immediately.

b6  
b7C

[redacted] did travel to STRAIGHT INCORPORATED where she was immediately separated from her son. [redacted] recalls signing numerous documents upon her son's admissions; however, she could not recall specific details due to being extremely agitated and upset over the whole incident. On this evening [redacted] was also instructed to withdraw her son from school based on medical reasons. [redacted] advised that STRAIGHT, as the parents withdraw the students, therefore, they cannot be accused of denying them an education.

2093 196B-TP-28810-19

SEARCHED	INDEXED
SERIALIZED	FILED
MAY 25 1993	
FBI - TAMPA	

u/c sent

b6  
b7C

Investigation on 5/7/93 at Clearwater, Florida File # 196B-TP-28810

by SA [redacted] /bjm Date dictated 5/7/93

196B-TP-28810

Continuation of FD-302 of [REDACTED]

, On 5/7/93 , Page 2

b6  
b7C

On an admission of her son, [REDACTED] did provide a \$3,500 deposit which was to cover the initial testings for her son. [REDACTED]

b6  
b7C

[REDACTED] was required to pay \$450 per month for the care of [REDACTED] which was the total amount of his Social Security benefits. [REDACTED] is not aware that she was required to pay host-home family fees and believed that this cost of care was included in the \$450 that she paid per month. During the initial admission phase [REDACTED] did inform STRAIGHT that she had no other means to pay STRAIGHT INCORPORATED. She was told not to worry about this and that Blue Cross/Blue Shield should cover the remaining balance. [REDACTED] later learned that Blue Cross/Blue Shield would not pay for STRAIGHT INCORPORATED's cost of care due to the fact that STRAIGHT is not recognized as a health-care facility. Her Blue Cross/Blue Shield did pay for any cost of care at outpatient facilities to include all children's hospital.

When [REDACTED] removed her son in [REDACTED] she continued to receive billings from STRAIGHT INCORPORATED; however, because they were not itemized, she did not know what dates of care these were in reference to [REDACTED] was later sued by STRAIGHT INCORPORATED for a remaining balance of \$2,900; however, she countered sued STRAIGHT INCORPORATED and the judgment was removed with prejudice. [REDACTED] did make reference to other problems at STRAIGHT INCORPORATED to include when she was [REDACTED]

b6  
b7C

[REDACTED] she was informed by STRAIGHT staff that they would notify her son. [REDACTED] later learned that they in fact had never informed her son that she was in the facility and that he was told that his mother did not come because she hated him.

[REDACTED] stated that she was initially extremely supportive of the programs and spoke to numerous parents and traveled to various high schools on behalf of STRAIGHT INCORPORATED. When her son was allowed to return to the family with other clients, she began to notice that he was extremely nervous, pale, and not eating. Following an observation of two weeks [REDACTED] became extremely concerned for her son. On one evening, after she had agreed to accept children into her homes, a "newcomer" informed [REDACTED] that if he was her son, he would be begging her [REDACTED] to remove him from STRAIGHT INCORPORATED. Prior to removing her son from STRAIGHT

b6  
b7C

196B-TP-28810

Continuation of FD-302 of [REDACTED]

, On 5/7/93 , Page 3

b6  
b7C

INCORPORATED, she did write numerous chain of command letters to STRAIGHT INCORPORATED as required by their policy. These complaints were either ignored or she was given a generic answer. In response to her filing these "chain of command" reports, her son was not allowed to come home with her with other children.

b6  
b7C

[REDACTED] removed her son when she witnessed physical abuse to him by [REDACTED] did attempt to initiate criminal charges against [REDACTED] however, when she reported it to HRS, she was not aware that she was also required to make the report to the police directly. The report to HRS was neither confirmed or denied regarding the abuse to her son.

b6  
b7C

[REDACTED] advised that her attorney is in possession of all her documents; however, she would get the billings for the different drug treatment and doctors that supposedly treated her son. [REDACTED] advised at this time, that her attorney had to sue STRAIGHT INCORPORATED to obtain a copy of her contract with the program. [REDACTED] will make this available to the investigative agencies.

b6  
b7C

[REDACTED] believes she paid over \$10,000 for the cost of her son's care at STRAIGHT INCORPORATED.