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The Evening Independent

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The Evening Independent *staff writer Bettinita Harris introduces you to young people and their pasts. The focus will be on the program, its staff members and the confrontations involved in the process.*

The Times Publishing Company
St. Petersburg, Florida

Inside STRAIGHT

In the beginning, a parent is not sure whether his child is just having trouble growing up, pushing the limits a little too far or rebelling a little too much. But, in time, it becomes evident that there's something more, a deeper problem.

"After all, in American society, puberty is a very complex and painful rite," says Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight National and program director of Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg. "It's like a disease itself.

"In the meantime, the family tries to cope with changes — trying various ways to cope with what is increasingly crazy behavior in the family. Nothing works — none of the good parenting, none of the being a good younger or older brother and sister works."

In order to survive in this increasingly painful, moody, hostile family-environment, people start to do unhealthy things.

When young people walk through the doors of Straight Inc., not only are their lives in a mess, but everybody in the family has become part of the illness — trying to cope.

"And at least some of the difficulities in their lives are visible to parents," Newton says. "That's why parents have reached the point where they have to face the fact that there's a problem."

Most of the time, there is a precipitating crisis — the young person has gotten kicked out of school, become a runaway, overdosed — that is the last straw, the bottom line, where the parents say, "That's it. I've got to do something."

By this time, Newton says, the young people are already in the third stage of the illness of drug use. That is, they are preoccupied with and their lives are centered around the use of drugs and getting high.

The losses begin. Straight friends are gone. Evidence of scholastic achievement is gone. Even the pretense of being straight is gone.

The young people are generally in trouble with the law. Usually, they have participated in illegal activities, but now they are careless enough to get caught.

"They feel desperately lonely. They feel like they're going crazy, literally losing the grasp on their own mind and sanity and reality. But they really don't know why. And they don't attribute it to the drugs."

So, they look at the people who surround them . . .

"Young people who are using drugs and who are acting like they are cool and have it all together . . . and they say, 'It must be me. There must be something wrong with me that I'm not handling it and everybody else seems to be handling it.'

"In order not to look bad, they pretend they are cool and have it all together, too.

"And so, you have this world of young people wandering around with a personal hell going on in their souls, pretending everything's all right with all the other young people who feel just as lonely, just as frightened and just as crazy and who are also pretending everything is okay."

In all of their pretending, though, the fear, the guilt, the emotional pain remain. A long time ago, he learned the technique of using drugs to snuff out bad feelings.

Newton says the young person gets high to relieve his pain and does things that violate his traditional morals.

"He comes down off the high and feels guilty. And then he gets high again to take care of the guilt feeling."

And the cycle becomes never-ending.

"He finally says, 'Wait a minute. I really don't like what I'm doing. I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm not going to get high. I'm not going to steal from my parents. I'm not going to go to bed with somebody I don't know.' "

But he does get high again and does the same things all over again.

"Not only does he feel guilty for the specific moral violation of his own values, but now he feels like he must really be bad if he does these things when he says he won't.

"The child starts to feel like he's no good. He thinks, "For me to do this stuff and keep doing it, I must be a piece of crap.'

"And, of course, what the child doesn't realize is the drugs are suppressing his moral position and suppressing his will or determination to be self-disciplined about anything."

For further help or information regarding our program contact us at any of the following locations:

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Post Office Box 1577
Pinellas Park, Florida 33565

Straight, Inc. Atlanta
2221 Austell Road
Post Office Box 848
Marietta, Georgia 30061

Straight, Inc.
National Development and Training Center
Post Office Box 40052
St. Petersburg, Florida 33743

Straight, Inc. Greater Washington, D.C. Area
Organizing Committee
Post Office Box 445
Great Falls, Virginia 22066

Straight, Inc. Sarasota
1401 Cattleman Road
Sarasota, Florida 33583

Straight, Inc. Cincinnati
6074 Branch Hill-Guinea Pike
Post Office Box 9
Milford, Ohio 45150

Christopher's story

My name is Christopher. I am 21 years old. The drugs I've used are pot, alcohol, hash, hash oil, ups/downs, prescriptions, acid, tye sticks, cocaine, opium, heroin, peyote seeds, nitrous oxide and rush. I've been in the program for 189 days. I've used drugs for 10 years.

The trouble started in fifth grade. I wasn't on drugs, but I was rebellious. I wouldn't do my homework. I remember a lot of disagreements with my mother.

I drank alcohol when I was 11. At 13, I started smoking pot at a scout camp. The older boys had some pot and I guess it was part curiosity and part peer pressure that led me to try it. I wanted to be accepted.

I began to think I was really cool . . . my image transformed. I wore faded-out jeans, tye-dye shirts, T-shirts and boots. I parted my hair down the middle and let it grow long.

In seventh grade, I defied teachers; cursed them. I was suspended for a week for hanging a moon at a teacher.

By eighth grade, I got high before school so I forged notes to cover for being late. I was suspended eight or nine times for truancy. During this time, I cut lawns for money to buy drugs. Sometimes I'd steal money from my parents or tell them I needed money for something at school.

In ninth grade, my sister's friends fronted me to deal. They'd give me drugs to sell for a certain amount, any amount I could get over that would be mine. I was smoking five or six times a week. I was taking really easy courses like shop, but my grades were dropping. But I maintained my athletic status.

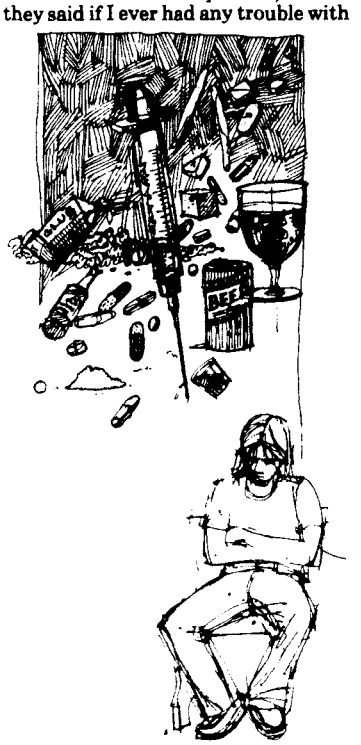
I got high every day in 10th grade. The first priority for me and my friends was to get high.

I slowed down on dealing in 11th grade because I'd almost gotten caught a couple of times. I never had any money because I used a lot of drugs I was supposed to sell.

It got to the point where I was drinking two or three times a week, smoking every day and skipping school. I quit the baseball and hockey team but I kept playing football.

The next year, I made team captain and had scholarship offers to play football for colleges. The first game of the season, I tore up my knee. I gave up on my whole future and drank and smoked every day. I began stealing from the delivery place where I worked, then got fired. I'd stolen nitrous oxide and I'd wrecked the company truck because I was drunk.

I finally graduated from high school by cheating and sneaking; I got a jeep as a reward. I damaged the jeep's roof, stole another roof and was charged with grand theft auto. I was sentenced to two years in the state penitentiary. The sentenced was suspended, but they said if I ever had any trouble with the law in that state, I would have to serve the sentence.



I didn't want to risk it, so I went to a Christian school in Texas. I soon got depressed because I never really liked school. I was doing cocaine, ups/downs, pot and hard liquor.

I closed off. My parents would call me, but I won't call them. I'd spend hours in the dorm room . . . put tinfoil over the windows so it would be dark . . . get high . . . stare at my little black and white television set for hours.

Doing drugs to be accepted had worn off. I had messed up my life and it didn't feel good. I did drugs to avoid bad feelings.

I quit school a year later and worked on an oil rig. I was doing acid two or three times a week, tye sticks, peyote seeds and cocaine. I'd get up in the morning, take a shower, brush my teeth and get stoned. I was always high, but I wasn't feeling good.

I quit the oil rig job to bounce for a bar. I wanted a job where I could fight, drink and pick up girls. I was taking drugs to go to sleep, drugs to wake up, drugs just to feel normal. I returned to the oil field, making $500 a week and spending half of that on drugs.

I bought a motorcycle and joined a bike gang. I had long hair, a beard . . . My life goals were to become leader of the gang and live for the moment.

One day I was at work, the police called to tell me to come home, something terrible had happened. My girlfriend killed herself; she shot herself through the head with one o my rifles.

While I cleaned blood off the walls, I couldn't believe my life. I hated my family because they had stopped calling me . . . my girlfriend was gone. I thought I'd lost everything. I promised I'd never do drugs again; I kept that promise for a week.

I kept seeing my girlfriend, lying there in a pool of blood. I didn't want to feel, I wanted to wipe my brains of thought, so I got deeper into drugs. One time I did 20 hits of acids in one week. At the end of that week, I had to think hard of how to pour water into a glass. I thought I was going crazy.

I was feeling so bad. And then, I had a thought . . . I was going to be dead by the time I was 21.

Jenifer's story

My name is Jenifer. I am 23 years old. The drugs I've used are pot, alcohol, hash, hash oil, THC, ups/downs, acid, PCP, tye sticks, cocaine, chloral hydrate, opium, heroin and mushrooms. I've been in the program for 105 days. I've used drugs for 11 years.

My family moved to Florida when I was 12. My brothers were druggies and I asked them to let me smoke pot; they did. I was drinking then, too. I used to replace the alcohol I drank with water so my parents wouldn't know.

I was 13 when I got kicked out of Girl Scouts for drinking on a campout. They said I could tell my parents and remain in Girl Scouts or get kicked out and my parents would never have to know what happened. I took the second choice.

The next year, I dated a guy 19. I went to bed with him and started taking pills and more pills — THC and acid. I got arrested for selling drugs at school and was put on probation for two years. I got into cocaine, speed, shooting up heroin and other drugs during the next two years. I made pretty good money working as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant.

I got a fake ID and hung out with older guys. I'd go to bars, meet guys, buy them beers and we'd go to bed a lot of the time.

My parents got divorced when I was 15. I didn't understand because they'd always gotten along. My father didn't want to be married anymore.

I ran away with my boyfriend that year. He was 24 and married. He'd stolen money for a drug deal from his friends. We left town hitchhiking to California, but, he deserted me in Georgia with an ex-boyfriend. I almost starved to death there. He wouldn't feed me because I wouldn't go to bed with him.

I was down to 75 pounds; my eyes were sunken into my head. The whole time I told my parents how wonderful things were, how I was doing good things for myself. My father said if things ever got bad, I could come to him in Massachusetts. I went there for a couple of months. I was 16.

When I heard from the boyfriend who left me in Georgia, I went to him in Idaho and supported him for almost two years.

I finally broke up with him and started dating this supposed friend of mine who was 40. I was 17. He talked

Justin's story

about how good a whore I'd make . . . I'd gotten fired from my job and I had to have some means of support so I got into prostitution.

My friend and I would go into hotel bars or lounges and he'd scout around for clients. He'd sell me on my innocent, little girl face. Clients would pay $100 a trick. I'd have three of four men in one night. We split the money 60 him, 40 me. But sometimes I'd get $50 tips and I kept them to myself.

I remember calling my mom in Florida to see how she was doing . . . my grandmother was ill and one of my brothers was getting married. I used that as an excuse to come home. When I got back, I moved in with my mother and got a job as a waitress.

A few months later, I moved to Fort Lauderdale to live with some 37-year-old guy I'd picked up in a bar. It was a convenient relationship. I could drive a Cadillac, have all the material things and drugs I wanted and didn't have to work. But I got bored after a while and moved out.

Later on, I got involved with a 40-year-old man. It was a sexual relationship. I still kept my apartment, but I spent most of my time at his house. He had a 14-year-old son who I was playing mother to. This man would give me money and all the drugs I wanted. That's when I got heavy into cocaine.

I felt miserable all the time, but, I had everything materialistic I ever imagined. I was lonely all the time, too . . . my boyfriend would leave and stay gone days at a time . . . he'd send his ex-wife over with a couple $100 and enough cocaine to keep me happy.

With that money, I bought large amounts of cocaine and sold it. I started losing money because I started doing the cocaine I was supposed to sell. I borrowed $3,000 from my mom and $2,000 from friends to pay off my drug debts I had in Miami.

I got fed up with that boyfriend and moved to another city. It was the first time I really felt depressed. I couldn't find a job. Then, when I did, I got fired cause I'd sneak to the bathroom every 15 minutes to snort cocaine.

I couldn't keep a steady job, so I solely depended on dealing drugs as a means of support, making two and three trips a week to Miami to buy drugs.

I felt myself closing off. I got so lonely I'd go to a bar, pick up some guy, he'd spend the night and I'd never see him again. Then I got too lazy to do that. I'd call the guy across the hall and ask him if he wanted to spent the night.

He was an alcoholic and we'd keep each other down. He'd talk about my drug problem; I'd talk about his drinking problem. He ended up snorting my cocaine; I ended up drinking his liquor.

My name is Justin. I am 17 years old. The drugs I've used are pot, alcohol, hash, hash oil, ups/downs, quaaludes, cocaine, PCP, acid, rush, nitrous oxide and heroin. I've been in the program for 170 days. I've used drugs for five years.

In third grade, I went to a public school. I was kind of like the jokester, but I got out of control.

My parents put me into this high-class prep school when I got in fourth grade. There, I got 100 percent better. I joked around, but I concentrated on my work.

Fifth grade, I got into smoking. I stole money from my mom's purse and gave it to my girlfriend. I don't think my mom ever knew. I wasn't on drugs, but I was a loud-mouth.

I started going downhill in sixth grade . . . smoking more cigarettes, going back to the ruckus-type stuff I was doing back in third grade.

Me and my friends started a Mafia thing. We'd bring pellet guns to school. Kids would put out contracts on people and we'd beat them up.

The first time I smoked pot I was out on a double date with my druggie friends. They asked me if I got high. I told them yeah, trying to be cool. They started passing around a bong. I took a hit, but I didn't inhale.

I started getting violent at home and into a lot of fights in school. They expelled me; thought I was a lunatic.

I started seeing this psychiatrist and he suggested I be put in this school for the emotionally disturbed.

I was 13 and everyone else was between 16 and 20 years old and a lot of them were on drugs.

I was really into pot and the next thing I knew I was using hard drugs like LSD. My mom had a prescription for quaaludes and I would steal them.

Within three months, I had gone from a neck-and-tie-wearing preppy to a long-haired, jean-wearing, drug user.

I met this 30-year-old guy while I was hanging around the shopping center. I talked about smoking pot and he said he didn't smoke pot, that he smoked green. He suggested I try it.

I sneaked out of the house to meet this guy and he turned me on to PCP. It was really weird; you just take a couple of puffs and you feel shaky and get paranoid. I started acting strange. My parents knew something was wrong, but they didn't know what.

In eighth grade, I got kicked out of school because I got caught with pot. After that, I was committed to a lockup unit at a psychiatric institute.

I was there for nine and a half months. I'll never forget that or the people I saw there for the rest of my life. There was a guy so messed up on drugs a cigarette would be burning his hand and he wouldn't even know it. Sometimes he was okay and then the next minute he went berserk and they'd put him in four-point restraints.

I wasn't on drugs — not my drugs. But I was on their drugs: something to bring me up, something to bring me down and something to counteract the side effects of both the other drugs.

I broke out of there a couple of times and they said they'd discharge me on the condition that I go to a wilderness camp. Before I went to the camp, I was home for three weeks. All I did was get high. I did pot, acid, valiums, hash and hash oil. When I got to the camp, it was hard. We had to build our own shelter and find our own food. We were allowed to go home once a month for seven days. I'd get high during my time home.

I ran away a couple of times, but my parents brought me back. The last time, I told my parents I didn't do drugs anymore. They believed me and pulled me from the program, but I had no intention of quitting drugs.

I started hanging around this rich guy. I soon turned him onto drugs and started using him for his money.

This one time I asked him for $100 and he stole it from his mother's purse. She called the police and they told me if I didn't return the money, I'd be charged with extortion. I gave the money back. My parents couldn't believe it because they always gave me money.

It wasn't long after this that I got into alcohol. It got to the point where I could drink a fifth of 100-proof liquor by myself. Every time I'd drink, I'd feel this anger inside.

I remember this one time when I drank alcohol and did quaaludes. That was the last thing I remember. I woke up in the hospital and saw my dad crying over me. He said I almost died. I had fought with police, run down the highway, thrown a tin can through a window, but I didn't remember any of it.

I continued drinking after I got out of the hospital. I was arrested for drunken driving and violation of curfew and was put in the Juvenile Detention Center and then probation.

When I got home, I started drinking. My mom and dad were at work so my sister and I were home alone. I just went crazy and started pushing and hitting her. She ran down the street to call the police.

I was charged with assault.

Inside STRAIGHT The Process

For the most part, the control is gone. Parents have lost control.

The chemically dependent child has lost control.

And yet, the life of the family centers on the disruption the chemically dependent child has caused.

"I saw my son in a big pool and he was going down for the third time. I had my hand reaching out to him, but he wouldn't take it," says one mother.

A father says, "It's like being trapped and watching your kid drown."

Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight National and program director of Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg, says Straight is in the business of helping young people return to values they gave up under the influence of drugs.

"They are returned to the mainstream values of their family, their church, their synagogue, their country. It's a process of helping and permitting young people to return where they would really like to be, where they feel good about themselves and their values."

When a young person enters the program, his body and his belongings are thoroughly searched for drugs. He is told he cannot have money or identification. He cannot make or receive telephone calls or letters. He cannot read, watch television or listen to the radio.

He cannot go outside, except to and from the car. Everywhere he goes, he is literally carried around by his belts loops to let him know he is not trusted and the body contact lets him know someone cares.

He gradually earns his rights back by working on himself and changing those personal characteristics that caused him to hurt himself and the people around him.

Newton says there are people who have problems with the Straight program because it holds the Silver Cord firmly.

"Adolescence is a period of experimentation, of pushing limits. But it's only safe for young people to go through that period of growing up if adults remain in charge and stop youngsters short of destroying themselves, short of having to take the lethal consequences of their own bad decisions.

"We believe in the concept of adults being in charge. I don't have any regrets about our position.

"I believe our position is the one that is safest for youngsters, where adults literally are the safety net while young people swing on the trapeze of growing up."

About 6 p.m. every Monday and Friday, cars begin to fill the parking lot that encircles an unmarked building at 3001 Gandy Blvd.

The building is gold and its solid, concrete walls sit in the midst of wilderness.

Children and adults scurry out of their cars carrying small pillows and fans. A few congregate in the parking lot, but most enter the building, sign in and go directly to a medium-sized room where refreshments are sold.

When 6:30 draws near, the people file into an already crowded auditorium-type room. Big, bland, beige.

Young people sit on the far side of the room; boys on one side, girls on the other.

The crowd files into row after row of blue chairs; girls' parents on one side, boys' on the other.

And the open meeting of Straight Inc. is called to order.

Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight National and program director of Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg, talks briefly about the program for the benefit of visitors.

He ends the introduction with, "What we're essentially going to do tonight is bare our souls to you. In return, we ask that what is said here, what is done here, stays here."

And with those words, the baring of souls begins. One by one, young people who have been in the program three to 14 days stand, before the staff, before their peers, before their parents and tell their stories.

"My name is . . . I am -- years old . . . The drugs I've taken are . . . I've been in the program for . . . I am a druggie. In my past. . . ."

They talk about their drug use. They tell stories about stealing and getting arrested. Stories about lying and cheating. Stories about using and being used. Stories that would make any mother, any father cry.

And they do cry.

As a young girl shares intimate details of a twisted lifestyle, it isn't difficult to determine who her parents are. Somewhere along the line, everyone in this room has been her parent. As one visiting parent put it, "Between sobs, I listened to the girls talk. Every one was my Terri."

When the newcomers finish, an oldcomer takes the microphone. He talks a little about his past, but mostly he talks about where he is now and the changes he is making; how he's rebuilding his family relationship, how he's planning to attend college in the fall, how he looks forward to tomorrow.

The crowd applauds. This is the celebration of life and its extremes — what is and what can be.

The mike begins a three-hour journey into the audience, passed from one person to another.

Some parents merely say, "I love you, Joanne" or "I love you, Carey." Those youngsters have either earned talking privileges and will visit with their parents after the meeting or they have earned second phase or higher and are living at home. For parents whose children are program newcomers, this is their only opportunity to see and talk to their children.

A middle-aged couple takes the mike. Mary, their daughter, stands across the room — arms at her side, eyes directly on her parents.

Her mother says: "I'm angry. I'm angry about the way you stole those checks out of my purse and forged my name on them because our family has to go without the things we want so that we can pay that money back. There's no place for you to go. Because you're not going back home until you're straight."

She hands the mike to her husband and slumps into his arms.

"Look at what you've done to your mother. It hurts me to see what you've done to her," Mary's father says and passes the mike.

Mary, still standing, sobs, "I love you, mom. I love you, dad."

To show their support, Mary's peers say, "Love you, Mary."

Another couple stands. Their son Michael stands.

His father begins: "Your sister is graduating from high school tonight and we can't be with her tonight. Here we are, sitting in a drug rehab because of you. It's not fair to your sister and I am p----d off about that."

"You've been here for 45 days and you haven't moved," his mother says. "We're sick and tired of coming here every Monday and Friday night and seeing you sit on your a--. We're working on our program and we're getting strong for you to come home. I love you, Michael."

"I love you, mom. I love you, dad."

"Love you, Michael," the group says.

Carolyn stands, as do her parents.

"Carolyn, I went to your room today. And you know what? Everything is in its place except for one thing — you. We want you to come home, but only you can make it possible. I love you, Carolyn."

"I love you, mom."

"Carolyn, like your mother said, we're just waiting for the day that you come home and we can start building a family relationship. I love you."

"Love you, dad."

"Love you, Carolyn."

The hour is late and parent raps are scheduled after the meeting. But no one in the audience speaks of the hour's lateness, no one thinks about leaving early. The mike is passed on.

Before his parents can say, "I love you, Charles," he yells, "Coming home" and runs across into the open arms of his parents.

"This is what we've been working for," his mother says. "It's not going to be easy, but we're getting stronger every day. I love you, Charles."

"I love you, mom."

"Son, I'm so happy for you. I know you've worked hard and I'm proud of you. We're looking forward to you coming home. Love you, Charles."

"Love you, dad."

"Love you, Charles."

The crowd applauds. This is the celebration of life and its extremes — what is and what can be.

Inside STRAIGHT

Rap sessions with family help all

Soon after the open meeting of Straight Inc. adjourns (story, page 1-b), the neat rows of blue chairs are dispersed into groups of four and five. Parents and siblings eagerly await the arrival of the youngster and look forward to their five-minute conversation. It's a time for making amends.

First, second and third phase parents congregate in the Commitment Room for their rap, while fourth and fifth phase parents are able to go home because their once-a-month rap with their children is scheduled at another time.

New parents to the program gather in the Awareness Room for a first in a series of six new parent raps. In these raps, parents learn about chemical dependency and about how that dependency has affected the family. It's their basic orientation into the program and how it works.

Ed Stack, executive staff trainee, leads the rap.

Stack explains Straight's philosophy of drug use as a disease of the feelings. Drug use is the primary illness; drug use is on-going and noncurable; drug use gets progressively worse in four stages; and drug use is terminal.

Stack then asks the group, "How do you feel about being here?"

One woman relates, "I feel relieved. I don't have to worry about police calling or knocking at the door late at night. I know where my child is. And I don't have

A man relates, "I don't want to be here. I've worked hard my whole life and tried to do the right thing. And I don't know why I have to be here. I didn't do anything wrong."

One woman says, "I feel a little guilty because we lied to him. We didn't tell him where we were taking him. I guess I feel guilty because he was so sweet that last day."

A man relates, "I lied to my son. I told him we were going to see a counselor. Yeah, I lied. And I'd lie and do anything else if it meant saving my kid's life."

Stack says, "All of you made a life-and-death decision. The end result of drug use is death. How many of your kids are in the first stage of the disease where a child is just learning he can produce a good feeling by using drugs? The second, where he starts to actively seek these feelings by planned use of drugs? The third, where getting high becomes the sole obsession and preoccupation of his life? (Most raise their hands.) The fourth, where he uses drugs just to feel normal?"

One woman relates: "My son is in the third phase. He didn't even pretend to be straight anymore. And you know, we moved from a bigger city to a smaller one because we thought it would be better for our kids. If only. . . ."

Stack interrupts, "You think it's your fault, don't you? Well, it's not your fault. You didn't make your kid take drugs. That was something he decided to do on his own. You didn't knock him to the ground, put your foot on his neck and make him take a puff off a joint."

Another woman relates: "You did what you thought was best. My family went to church every Sunday and was involved in church activities during the week. We found out later that's where my girl was getting her drugs — from church. Drugs are everywhere. It doesn't matter where you go."

Stack asks, "How many of you felt like you were going crazy? How many of you feel resentment toward your druggie kid? And how many of you just felt like running away? These feelings are normal. A person who is chemically dependent makes a home a place of lunacy."

Stack asks, "How many of you thought your kid was crazy, so you took him to see a psychiatrist?"

Most raise hands.

One man relates: "The doctor virtually told us that Don's problem was our fault. He told us we were being too strict and we needed to give him more room and responsibility."

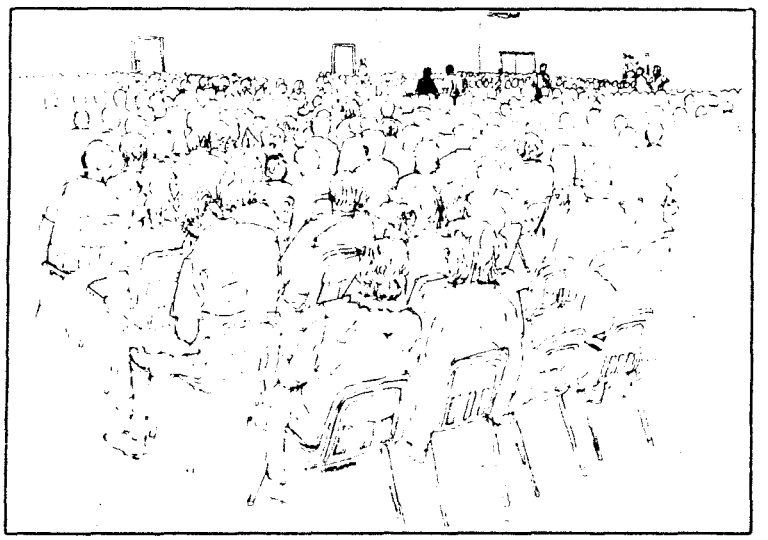
Stack asks: "How many of you thought about getting rid of your druggie?"

A parent volunteer relates: "All of our family's problems were because of him. He just disrupted all of our lives. It seemed like we were all crazy. I just thought if I could get rid of him, all of our problems would be solved. I wondered if there was something I could put in his food that wouldn't be effective for a couple of hours so it couldn't be traced to me. That's how crazy things got."

Stack says: "Those feelings are normal and you need to get those feelings out. You need to tell your child how you feel, not lecture or complain to him. Deal with him in feelings, not concepts.

"Your children are relearning to relate their feelings. As a druggie, they think in terms of things. They have pushed their feelings down. And you, as a druggie's parent, have pushed a lot of your feelings down to try to keep peace in the family. You're in this program along with your child. They are relearning the process of being a feeling person. And we won't ask your child to do anything we won't ask you to do."

After their raps, parents gather their materials and go home. The young people return home or to an oldcomer's home.



Sketches by Lee Kershner, reprinted from brochures with the permission of Straight Inc.

Day by day

Each day at Straight Inc. begins and ends with a song. The songs are like bookends, instruments that keep material between them upright.

The young people sit up straight as they did last night; boys on one side, girls on another. One learns from trial an error that the only way to sit comfortably on these hard, blue chairs is to slide your hips all the way back into the chair and slightly tilt your trunk forward. Most have learned the secret. Those who haven't, squirm most of the day trying to find the right combination.

Most of the girls wear summer slacks and blouses. Their hair is neatly combed and held away from their faces with rubber bands, barrettes or combs. Cosmetics don't cover their faces. Jewelry doesn't jiggle from their ears or necks. Straight took these things away from them when they entered the program.

The boys wear slacks with shirts that have collars. White T-shirts, T-shirts with pictures or writing, muscle shirts and thongs are not allowed. For the most part, their hair is cut short and parted on one side. A few newcomers continue wearing their hair long, but day after day of looking different from the group takes it toll. They soon will decide to get their hair cut.

In front of the group are the Seven Steps and two rap leaders. To the sides and back stand Fifth Phasers. They are young people who have worked hard and have earned the right to stand as examples, says Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight.

Orange partitions now divide in two this auditorium-like room that served as a meeting place last night. For most of the day, the air conditioning remains idle, but the doors are propped open as a remedy to the heat. Nevertheless, the young people become damp with perspiration. The staff perspires along with them.

"You're not going to find any pool tables or swimming pools here," says one Seventh Stepper. "Straight is tough. But, then, life is tough."

* * *

During four raps a day, young people talk about themselves under the supervision of staff members.

Some talk honestly, some not so honestly. For the latter, the demon of denial is at work. But there is always someone willing to demonstrate the principles of tough love, ready to help penetrate the denial, the conning, the dishonesty.

When a young person enters the program, Straight strips him of his drugs and all of those things associated with the drug culture. There is nothing tangible to hold onto. No drugs. No druggie friends. No druggie clothes.

But a druggie's image of himself as a druggie remains.

A Fifth Phaser says it's a matter of the group helping a person break down a druggie image that grows inside a person's head, spreads to the outside, hardens like cement, leaving the real person and his feelings trapped inside.

The twisted details of his past — the drugs he took, the activities he was involved with while he was on drugs, how he messed up his schooling and destroyed his family relationship — are constantly thrown in his face.

The facts. The *unadulterated* facts.

The newcomer doesn't relate the first three days. This gives him an idea of how the group operates. After he hears people talking about themselves and their pasts, he isn't as afraid to talk about himself.

At first, most newcomers just tell true stories, says one Seventh Stepper. They give the group information about incidents, but they don't tell how they feel about what happened.

"But they are talking about themselves and their pasts and that's a beginning. After they start really opening up to the group, and start getting the positive feedback, then they feel more confident about themselves," says the Seventh Stepper.

* * *

On Monday and Friday mornings, the rap is called Homes. It's during this rap that young people who believe they have worked hard enough to earn a status change apply for the change.

A young person brings his request before the group, his peers. Judging from his performance the previous few weeks or days, they state their opinions about his progress. They vote on it. Executive staff members consider the group vote, the newcomer's progress reports (which are written by his "oldcomer"), when they make the final decision.

Members of the group find out about their status changes in the moments before open meeting starts.

Today, during Girls' Homes, Kathy has been in the program for 14 days and she asks for talk (permission to talk with her parents for five minutes after open meeting).

The group responds.

One girls says: "In order for you to talk to your parents, you have to talk to us. You haven't shared about yourself. You have to share your past."

Another girl says: "When I earned talk, I talked about my past. You haven't. I see you coming in here acting all timid and shy. We know you're not like that at all. We're all druggies and we have bad attitudes and you're not bringing that out."

And another: "I don't see you talking in group. No one is going to push you along here. You just better get off your a-- and start working."

Although her peers vote that she has earned nothing, they continue to show their support by saying, "Love you, Kathy."

Dawna has been in the program for 45 days and she ask for talk.

The group responds.

One girl says: "There's no way you deserve talk. This morning you told a Fifth Phaser that you wanted to be pulled from the program."

Dawna admits the statement is true. She says, "I don't want to give in. I don't like it here. I don't think I deserve to be here. I just want to go home."

Rap leader says: "Go home? You can't go home. You're parents told you at open meeting they don't want you home until you get straight. I'm offended because you think this is a big joke. But, you know, you're the joke. You're sitting here 17 years old in a drug rehab program and you don't have anything."

The group votes that she earn nothing.

"Love you, Dawna."

Tina has been in the program for 62 days and asks for nothing.

The group responds.

One girl says: "I don't believe you. You've been here 62 days. You should have earned home by now. What the h--- is wrong with you? Do you like being on first phase? Do you like having someone carry you around by the belt loops? Do you like not talking to your parents? If you want to get out of here, you better get moving."

Another: "You've been in the program that long and I still don't know anything about you. You're still holding onto that druggie boyfriend of yours. He's in jail and he can't do anything for you. All he did was use you anyway. You need to talk about your past to blow it away."

And another: "You ask for nothing and we'll give you nothing. You must really enjoy your peanut butter diet."

The group votes that she earn nothing.

"Love you, Tina."

Shayla has been in the program for 80 days and she asks for Second Phase, during which the child returns home to live.

The group responds.

One girl says: "I feel good about you. I see you really opening up to the group and sharing your feelings and I think you deserve home."

Another: "You've made a lot of changes since you got here, and I feel good about that. I can see you working hard trying to make changes and I think you're ready to start working on your family relationship."

And another: "I can see the changes you've made. Your face is starting to soften up and your eyes even look shiny. I think you're ready to go home."

The group votes that she earn the right to go home.

"Love you, Shayla."

Inside STRAIGHT

From the day a child enters the Straight Inc. program and begins recovering from drug use, his parents begin parent raps to understand what happened to their child, to learn about the disease and the recovering process. They also begin to understand those things they did that got them involved in the disease.

About two weeks later, the brothers and sisters get involved in the therapy process at sibling raps.

"You've got to start with the fact that the disease of drug use or alcoholism is a family disease," says Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight National and program director of Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg.

"That isn't to say the families make the users sick. But, in trying to cope with the druggie child, a kind of madness takes over family members."

The one common denominator among families in the program, Newton says, is they care enough about their child to make sacrifices as a family unit for about a year to help the child straighten out his life.

In the beginning, parents are required to attend open meetings from 6:30 p.m. to midnight or later every Monday and Friday. Until a child earns the right to talk with his parents, the open meeting is the only time a parent talks to (over a microphone) or sees his child, who lives with an oldcomer's family until he earns second phase privileges.

The older and younger brothers and sisters also attend raps on open meeting nights. In addition, brothers and sisters go to a sibling rap on Saturday mornings.

When the child on the program earns second phase and comes home, the family is required to change its home activities between 9 p.m. and 9 a.m. There are restrictions on radio and television use and the child is required to stay indoors.

"There is a lot of family time spent together, sharing and dealing with things that have occurred between them and the druggie child in the past."

It isn't long before the child brings home other young people of the same sex, as newcomers.

"Part of this young person's program is to teach new young people what he or she has learned. The family's life starts to revolve around two trips a day to the program. That goes on for the better part of a year for most families — extra people in the house, extra travel to the program, the restrictive rules at home to limit participants (particularly newcomers) from having the ability to leave, or getting hold of things that might be dangerous to themselves or other people — chemicals or whatever else."

Newton says the Straight therapeutic process involves many sources that have been bought together and put into a single, very complex therapeutic model.

Program keys on interaction, involvement

The model is based on understanding of drug use as a disease of the feelings that was originated in describing alcoholism as a disease process. The particular version Straight uses is an adaptation of the work of Dr. Vernon Johnson of the Johnson Institute in Minneapolis.

The model includes two concepts from the Alcoholics Anonymous program — the concept of those who have the problem and are recovering helping others and the process of spiritual change — plus family systems therapy, rational therapy tools; peer counseling and positive peer pressure; and techniques of interpersonal interaction.

The majority of the staff is made up of young people who have been through the program and are recovering.

Before or after they've graduated, they have the opportunity to take an eight-week counselor training course, studying basic counseling techniques seven hours a week.

"But that's not the beginning, because they learned about counseling when they worked with their newcomers, when they related to other people in group therapy. So every kid who goes through this program has had some therapeutic training in counseling and interpersonal relationships before ever taking the formal training."

After the course, a student can apply for a position as staff trainee, which is a three- to six-month apprenticeship position where they work 30 hours a week and receive no pay. They have no decision-making authority, but they work their way up in skills.

Following the apprenticeship, they can apply for paid staff positions on the junior and senior staffs. A junior staff member, who is responsible for many of the day-to-day duties, works 30 to 35 hours a week. A few young people make senior staff member, which is supervising new staff members 40 to 45 hours a week. All young people on staff are supervised by adult professionals.

"Our para-professionals have put in more time in supervised training than someone who has a doctrate degree in clinical psychology with a license for private practice with the two years of mandatory supervised internship."

Before the group, senior staffer Shawn Arnow sits on a stool — the rap stool, they call it — as she leads the girls' morning rap session.

The other chairs in the room are purposely lower than the rap stool. The added height allows Shawn to observe the group and all of its members.

Shawn hasn't always been here, sitting on the rap stool, leading raps and trying to get troubled young people motivated about getting straight. It wasn't long ago that Shawn was on the other side, sitting on one of the lower chairs.

"All I was interested in was going out, partying and having a good time," Shawn recalls. "Before I knew it, I was sitting in detention centers. I was sitting in lockups. I was going through court. I was in the back seat of police cars. I was pregnant. And I found myself for the third year in a row sitting in Seminole High School, in the same class, in the same grade. I had not progressed. I started feeling really bad at where I was with my life."

When her family could no longer tolerate the situation, Shawn was put into Straight.

During Shawn's intake, "It took seven hours of confrontation. Seven hours of people throwing up where I'd been and things I'd been doing before I would admit I needed to be here."

When Shawn entered the program, she was stripped of jewelry and of her friends. People in the group constantly confronted her about issues with which she didn't want to deal.

"I tried to avoid it for three years and, in two weeks, it was all in front of me. How I used my mother. How I was one of the major reasons for busting up what was at one time a good family. How I screwed up in school. All that came down on me. And that hurt.

"They told me: 'Shawn you're just a dime a dozen, a dime a dozen, just another girl out on the streets. Eventually you're going to end up being a prostitute.'

"I never wanted to be just an anybody. I wanted to be someone important. That's when I realized I wanted to change."

Shawn completed the program in 17 months and has been a member of the staff for two years. Shawn, who is also working on a high school diploma, plans to attend college or join the Air Force.

"There's nothing I enjoy more than walking out in that group of 300 people and getting them motivated, getting them inspired about getting straight."

The happiest time for Shawn is watching the process, watching hard faces soften, dull eyes brighten. She says you can always see a young person's change by his face.

"There is something about seeing someone stand up and say, 'I remember the time I held a knife on my mother. And I feel so bad about it.'

"They knock off the macho bit or the sexy girl act and say, 'I'm hurting and I'm scared.'

"You've got all these girls and guys quietly listening, at full attention. And when he's through sharing his bad experience and how he feels about it, someone stands up and stays, 'You can do it. I know it feels bad on the first phase, but you can do it.'

"It's something to hear them start to break down and begin to go through the same process I did."

— Shawn Arnow, senior staffer

"I was so damn brainwashed when I was a druggie," says Dave McAdams, staff supervisor.

"As I grew up, I was taught to be honest, be good, try hard, do good things for yourself, get educated, stay healthy, look two ways before you cross the street. . . .

"But when I was a druggie, my druggie friends taught me to get high, get stoned, tell your parents to go to hell, rebel against the world, keep cool, freak out, do drugs, get high, break the law, tell cops to go to hell . . . ."

Dave had used drugs for six years when he entered Straight in December 1978 at age 16. Now part of the executive staff, Dave, is responsible for daily staff scheduling and supervising the group staff that counsels young people in the progam. In the fall, he plans to attend college in Indiana.

"I'm not going to try to kid you. Straight is a tough program," Dave says. "It's not the kind of program where you walk in and there's a pool table and a game room and there's a counselor who says we'll allow you to do what you want. It's not like that; it's a no-nonsense program."

Dave says Straight is a highly organized, therapeutic program with counselors that care. He says the young people in the program have to follow strict rules. Misbehaving is not tolerated.

"Before a young person comes here, all of his happiness and security is in drugs, his druggie friends, his druggie clothes, rock music, his girlfriend/her boyfriend. They come in with their jewelry, makeup, long hair, rock concert T-shirts, their drug paraphernalia and sometimes drugs."

He says 99 percent of the young people who come into the program have done drugs, committed crimes and been involved in what might be considered perverted sexual activity.

But, more than that, when a young person comes to Straight, he is unhappy.

"We have kids who have been through all kinds of hell . . . kids who have been on every drug you can think of for eight or nine years. And then we have kids that aren't that bad, maybe they've just done pot and alcohol for a few months. But they're all unhappy.

"As soon as they walk through those doors, all of their 'security' is taken away. We strip them of all of their druggie attitudes, their druggie lifestyle. We take away their druggie image to get them back to the real self."

When he entered the program, Dave says, "I believed I was born to do drugs.

"Straight just pointed out the facts. The facts were: I was 16. I was flunking out of school. The facts were: I had a horrible family relationship. The facts were: I had no goals for my future. I was unemployed. I had no money in the bank. I was dealing drugs to get money. Those were the facts.

"Straight pointed those things out to me and that's what we do. We take the facts that are inside of the young people to help them see themselves."

— Dave McAdams, staff supervisor

You can take the drugs away from a druggie, but he'll still be a druggie, says Pierce Kuhn, senior staff member.

"It's what you call a dry-druggie. Those are the people who are not smoking the pot and drinking the beer, but their attitude is the same, their morals are the same, their beliefs are the same, their habits are the same as a druggie — the only thing missing is the drugs."

Pierce, who has gone through the program, says you have to do more than just take away drugs.

"What we deal with is those things that are going to cause a person to go back to drugs. Those are the things that have got to change."

The two common denominators about the young drug user is that he is not feeling good and he is confused about what to do, Pierce says.

"Druggies use the chemicals to make them feel good because they don't feel good on their own. They don't understand the feelings they're going through. When you do drugs, you go through so many feelings of hate toward yourself, anger toward other people, hurt and disappointment for all the things you've done. It's a thing where you're not in control."

When a newcomer enters the program, his past is thrown before him. What he has done to his family, school situation, society and to himself is thrown before him again and again.

"I was doing from pot and alcohol to mushroom juice from cow pastures to acid, quaaludes and cocaine all the time. I'd never been committed to anything. I'd been unhappy for a long time. All I really wanted was to be happy. But I quit on everything. I quit on sports. I practically quit on school. I quit on all my good friends.

"When I came into the program, my morals and my beliefs were so messed up, I guess you could say I needed someone to cleanse my brain.

"I had so many twisted morals, twisted beliefs and twisted thoughts that if those thoughts were put into action, they could find anyone in jail, in a mental institution or dead.

"I needed somebody to tell me where some things were at. I needed somebody to yell at me and say, 'Look, Pierce, what you're thinking is not right. That will screw you up and you're going to end up back on the streets.'

"I had to have people tell me that."

This is the biggest purpose of the rap sessions.

Pierce says the staff leads the young people to teach themselves as they talk.

"We *lead* raps. We don't go out there and speak the whole time, the group talks. We try to teach them to deal with every issue there is. There's nothing better than going out and doing a good rap with a bunch of kids. Seeing not just one kid change, but a number of them.

"I don't consider myself the changer or solver of their problems. But I know I'm helping. The biggest most important thing for me is for them to get the same things I have."

— Pierce Kuhn, senior staff member

When a young person Seventh Steps, or graduates from the program, he is told, "you've been learning your program — from this moment on, it's time for you to practice it," says Chris Yarnold, after-care coordinator.

"It's not going to be an easy road. It basically means saying yes to being straight each day of your life, the rest of your life."

After care, which usually lasts the first six months after a young person has graduated, is basically helping young people with the problems they face.

"We have a support group called the Seventh Step Society, which meets twice a week for raps. Parents attend raps twice a month. Now the staff is no longer taking responsibility for the kids. Parents are now staff."

The raps allow young people and parents to get together and share some of the problems and fears they have about graduating.

As time progresses throughout the phases, the young person is making the transition. While on third and fourth phase, he was slightly tapering off from the program, making the adjustment of going to school and work, having fewer days in the program and not being tied down so much by rules.

But, Chris says, the major adjustment comes when he makes the seventh step. It's like touching reality.

"Any Fifth Phaser is apprehensive of seventh step because he doesn't know what's on the other side of the fence.

"Fifth Phasers have the large group — when they go out there, they feel good. They feel they're part of that group. When someone Seventh Steps, he has that group to a certain degree, but he's told he has to work for himself."

At the same time, Chris says, the new graduate knows he has the support group.

After six months, kids are free to do their own thing, if they want to, says Chris.

"We don't want them to feel so much security in a group that they can't function by themselves. But we also want them to know that the doors are always open."

— Chris Yarnold, after-care coordinator

The drug problem doesn't have a color; it's universal.

"But how do we reach the black community? To heighten their awareness that Straight is here for people, not just colors? I find this to be the one problem in the program," says Beverly Hardy, executive staff trainee.

Beverly is in a three-month training session at the St. Petersburg branch of Straight Inc. to become program coordinator for the branch in Cincinnati. She will be the first black member of the executive staff.

"Black people have had to deal with their own problems themselves all of their lives . . . Black people don't go to anybody for help; it's a family problem; it's no one else's business. But it is."

Beverly says one facet of the program that deters blacks from participating is the sharing. Program participants virtually bare their souls, their pasts, to others in the program.

"It's a problem of relating. They don't feel that they can relate to a sea of white faces."

Beverly had similar concerns when she was interviewed for the job.

"My interview was the most emotional experience I've had in my entire life. They basically wanted to know all about my nine-year drug past, my private life.

"I had never shared my feelings, my past, with white people . . . (but) they weren't just white, they were people who had been through the same type of experience I had. They could relate to where I was coming from."

Beverly, who has an associate degree in business administration, was working at a marketing research firm when she applied for the position of program coordinator of Straight. After the Cincinnati staff recommended her for the job, she visited the St. Petersburg branch and was later hired.

"To get an idea of the program, I went to the open meeting . . . it was like seeing myself on the front row and hearing my past all over again."

Beverly says she realized that as long as you have something in common, you have something to work with.

"I've been on drugs and they've all been all drugs. Everybody in group has been on drugs, and there are black kids in the world who could relate.

"I wish the word would get out that Straight doesn't have a color."

— Beverly Hardy, executive staff trainee

—Jenifer revisited

I looked at how much abuse I had put myself through. It still hurts me when I think about it sometimes . . .

Jenifer.

I sat through the open meeting with my folks. I didn't know I was going to be an intake; didn't know why I was here.

I heard the introductions and I thought my dad was just trying to make a point.

My father begged me to talk to some of the girls. So I went into the intake room and there were three girls. At first they talked casually.

I smiled a lot, acted proper and like I was better than them and I didn't have any problems. They said everything was confidential. I thought I'd tell them what they wanted to know and leave.

A member of the executive staff came in and said I had a pretty smile, "but I see a lot of hurt behind those eyes and that smile." And I just broke down and started crying. I admitted there was a lot of hurt, a lot of pain.

Finally, they brought my dad in and let me talk to him. I gave my dad and mom a big hug. I told them I loved them and they left. I didn't see them again until the next open meeting.

The first open meeting, where I had to introduce myself, I sobbed through the whole thing.

I was hurt seeing my parents out there, knowing how much I'd put them through and knowing what I was saying was hurting them.

I wasn't ready to feel those feelings. I didn't want to feel 'cause I was scared, I was scared of hurting. I thought I hurt enough.

Here I was at Straight . . . no drugs, no nothing. I had go back over a lot of years and talk about things I didn't want to talk about.

When I first came in, they wanted to know more about where I was at before I came into the program. But I wanted to talk about things that happened before I was 12.

At first, I'd just tell a true story with all the little details; I wouldn't share my feelings, my problems.

I needed to talk about myself and my past. But it wasn't easy standing up and talking to strangers about private things. They *were* strangers, though, and somehow that made the difficulty easier. They didn't know me; they weren't going to judge me; and they promised not to tell.

After a while, my emotions just let loose. I was just hurting a lot 'cause I was facing up to how far down I'd gone. I looked at how much abuse I had put myself through. It still hurts me when I think about it sometimes.

I hadn't had feelings for a long time. I felt deadened . . . I was involved in things that had me emotionally drained, but I wouldn't allow myself to feel anything.

Sometimes I put myself back into a situation in my past and I can feel that same anger, that same hurt. And it scares me. I don't like it.

I really opened up to the group and I earned permission to talk on the 14th day. I had never earned anything in my life. I went home (second phase) on the 49th day.

My family and I are real open with each other. I am at ease telling my parents how I'm feeling. I'm building a close relationship with my little sister.

I was on first phase so long because I would humble myself. The first thing I had to do was admit I had a problem. I had to admit I was powerless over drugs. The whole time I tried to con myself and everybody else. I tried to quit, but couldn't.

Then I had to go to a higher power. Whether it be the group or a friend or God, anybody who can help me is my higher power. I really started to work on myself and I can see the changes. I'm really looking forward to my future and being in the nursing program at college in the fall.

When I was home for the weekend, I felt kind of special and kind of pretty. It's the inside of me. I feel really clean. I lied for so long, I was dishonest, sneaky and a con. It feels so good to be honest.

I look up to the staff members, the Fifth Phasers and the Seventh Steppers. They look like they have it all together. In my past, I would look up to the big drug dealers for their money and jewelry. And I came in here and looked at these girls and thought, they've got their lives together; they're straight; they're happy.

That's what I've always wanted — people to respect me. But I went about it the wrong way.

I thought I would con my way through; I've conned through everything else. But then all of a sudden I saw myself giving in and my first reaction was, "What's wrong with you? What are you doing giving in; you're losing."

But then I saw that by losing, I was winning.

Justin revisited

Justin.

After that incident with (physically abusing) my sister, I was court-ordered into the program.

During my intake, these guys came in and started talking to me. They didn't look like they'd ever done drugs. I just listened to them talk. I didn't mind being here just as long as I could get out by 10 o'clock so I could go to the liquor store.

I got kind of irritated when they read the rules. I couldn't believe my parents put their son in a situation like this.

When I went out to group, I saw this old druggie friend of my who was on fourth phase. He had done a 180-degree turnabout. He was singing, motivating and sitting up straight. I couldn't believe it.

On the second night, I tried to escape from my foster home. I got caught in 15 minutes. When I got to group, I was confronted. I was confronted about my attitude, about misbehaving, about my long hair, but I just wouldn't listen. After they yelled at me, then they'd say, "Love you, Justin." I thought, how could they love me when they don't even know me.

I got frozen on my 18th day and was on the peanut butter diet. They give you peanut butter sandwiches when all you do is sit and not try to make changes. They say peanut butter is bland, but it also has a lot of protein that will get you moving.

Anyway, I kept misbehaving in group for attention and to avoid myself and my past. I'd try to clique with some of my old druggie friends.

I remember the last time I started fighting in group. Some bigger boys took me into the timeout room and started yelling and screaming at me. I turned off until I looked over at my oldcomer. He had tears in his eyes. And I thought, these people really do care for me. That's when I decided I wanted to make a change.

I started talking in group, sharing my past and my feelings. I really felt good.

I finally made home (second phase). Shortly after that is when I had thoughts of leaving, but I didn't share it with group. I thought it was wrong to talk about wanting to leave. Anyway, my preoccupation with leaving interfered with my program and I started making mistakes with my newcomers.

I got put on a 14-day refresher (where a young person is temporarily put on newcomer status). That gave me time to really know where I was at. The group helped me out a lot.

I'm on fourth phase now and I have to be careful because it's really easy to fall back into the woodwork. It's easy to think you've got it made on fourth phase.

I know I'll will never have it made. I'll have to decide every day of my life whether I am going to be straight.

—Christopher revisited

Christopher.

Two days before I entered the program, I came in for a pre-intake because I was over 18.

I did it for my parents. They seemed more concerned about my future than I was. I thought I would see what the program was like and get them off my back.

I came to the open meeting and heard people talk about their pasts. I was amazed at how people off drugs for three or four days could talk openly about their pasts.

It was fine for those kids because they were younger. Then a guy who was 22 started relating and I could relate to him. He impressed me. That was the reason I decided to give it a shot.

The next day I came in for intake. I still had it in the back of my mind that I was doing it for my parents. Once I got out, I would go back to Texas and join my biker gang and do drugs.

I listened to the people and I admitted I had a drug problem. But when I had to sign myself into the program, I didn't want to.

I realized the program was for real. Something that wasn't a government-funded program. Something that was downright work. It was going to be hard to get straight. This was not some country club. Not some place where I could come in and smoke my cigarettes and sit back and lie down. I decided I didn't want to do it.

I got into denial. I told them I wasn't really that bad off. I told them, although I've done drugs in the past, I'm not a junkie.

Finally I signed in. I had a decent attitude, but I still blamed my parents — they lied to me, they railroaded me into this.

The first few days, I had trouble getting used to the rules and the program.

On the second day, I stood up and walked toward the door. Everybody grabbed me. They said just wait 14 days, and if I didn't change my mind, I could pull myself (from the program).

After 14 days, I asked for (permission to) talk (with parents) instead. I got it and, after that, I started participating. I sung the songs. I listened to the people around me.

At first, I thought I had a story nobody else had. But it seemed at least one person had done something I had done in my past. No matter what kind of story I brought out of the closet, somebody could relate.

On the first phase, you're suppose to get in touch with your feelings. I talked about instances that happened. But I had a hard time getting in touch with my feelings.

They asked me how I felt about my girlfriend killing herself. I would say I don't know how I felt. That was my defense.

But when I started to feel, I knew they were getting to me. Eventually more feelings started to come up that I hadn't felt in 10 years.

It got where I could relate my feelings and I was feeling good about myself. I had earned three talks and then three 'talk and responsibilities.' I got my hair cut; started sitting up straight; and wearing alligator shirts.

On the 35th day, I earned home, second phase. That was a real big step. I knew I had earned it and I knew I'd made changes. I knew I was being honest.

On the night I made it, I felt like I'd accomplished something. Thirty-five days was the longest I hadn't done drugs in 10 years. I'd never seen my parents so happy.

On second phase, you continue to work on yourself and to start building family relationships. I made amends to them for all the things I'd done, like lying and stealing from them.

I talked all night. My parents just listened. They said my face had changed, that it was softer.

But, after a while at home, I had some doubts. I realized I didn't have to go back.

I told my parents I wasn't sure if I wanted to go back. My parents were strong with me. They said, "We don't want you to die and we're committed to this program and we're going to do everything in our power to see that you have a good life."

I was shocked at the strength they had gained in the last 35 days. It was a test, to see if they would be strong or weak with me. If they had been weak, I would have been weak, too.

I got closer with my family. We sat, laughed and talked around the dinner table. We did things we've never done before. I just had fun being with my parents for a change. Before, I would always try to avoid them.

We ironed out some of the old attitudes that were there, like my getting defensive when my mom asked me to do something. But we would talk about that defensiveness right away. There was no buildup and nothing was held in.

A week later, I took in newcomers. I concentrated so much on my newcomers that I forgot about myself.

I got hung-up on the fact that I was higher up in the program. I was an oldcomer; I had to set an example for my newcomers. I thought I wasn't supposed to go through anymore troubles.

I didn't deal with my troubles and I had thoughts of going back to my past. They call it eurphoric recall — all I could remember was the good things about my past.

I talked about it in group. Everybody helped me out. They said, "Hey, you don't want to go back to that. Remember this time and that time."

I had actually forgot about the bad times I had in my past. They helped me straighten things out. I got closer to God and read my Bible. And all of this was totally new to me, something I'd never done before.

After a while, I requested third phase. On the fourth day, I was on responsibility duty and I just decided I was leaving. I ran for the woods. A staffer pulled around the corner, saw me and beeped his horn.

I lost them in the woods. I felt terrible, like I'd ruined my life in that one decision. A staff trainee found me. He was a foot and a half shorter than I was. I could have gotten away from him easily, but all of my energy was drained out of my body.

I was started over on first phase. I planned to go back to get my motorcycle, but I found out later that it had been stolen the same day I ran. My motorcycle was my last back door.

I believe I'm getting more out of my second program than my first. On my second program, I know I want to be here. I want this program to work for me. Whereas, on my first program, I always had that doubt. I was missing that commitment on my first program and it caught up to me.

I'm back on second phase and have gone back home to my parents. They have gained even more strength than before. I am proud of myself and it shows in my actions.

When I get on third phase, I plan to go to flight training school. Someday I'd like to get married, have three or four kids and live a Christian life. Most of all, I want to be happy. I know the only way for me to be happy is for me to live God's will and apply my program.

I also have to keep remembering that my drug problem is as close behind me as my shadow. And if I stop looking forward, stop pushing myself, it will catch me.

That scares me and that's what keeps me going.

Straight is a private non-profit program exclusively for the rehabilitation of youthful drug abusers, between the ages of 12 and 21, and their families.

Utilizing 'tough love' overcomes drug use

Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight National and program director of Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg, says oldcomers can help penetrate the denial, the conning, the dishonesty and provide understanding about the stages a person has to go through in order for change to occur.

Straight also involves parents of young people and siblings — who, in time, help other parents and siblings deal with the drug use and the recovery process.

"Straight combines the best of peer counseling and positive peer pressure with good professional skills," Newton says. "It combines scientific therapeutic tools with the spiritual program of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) to accomplish change."

Straight is a community of love. Tough love.

"Soft love says: Anything you want, I still love you. Tough love says: I love you, but I'm holding you accountable.

"Because I love you, I will not let you do things that hurt you. I won't keep you from facing the bloody finger that comes when the hammer doesn't hit the nail, but hits your finger. Tough love will make sure that you learn, because being a mature, responsible adult means having some pain, as well as some pleasure, in life.

"Tough love has to do with holding people accountable — parents holding children accountable for their behavior."

Straight first places a young person in an environment where drugs can't be attained for a reasonable period of time.

"By the time the child comes into the program, he is dependent upon drugs to feel good, to cope with reality. There's no way a child can quit on his own."

If the staff discovers any drug use among the siblings, they are immediately required to enter the program. Also, if staff members discover the parents have a drug problem, they, too, are required to enter a rehabilitation program of Straight's choice within 24 hours after the discovery.

Straight does something else, too. From the time a young person enters the program, he is told: It's your fault. You did it.

"Whatever your situation is, good or bad, there were other young people in the same situation you were in who chose not to do drugs.

"We essentially say: You screwed up everything in your life. You've blown your family, your school, your ability to walk around free, the privilege of people trusting you.

"Therefore, someone else will be in charge of you. Another young person who is far enough in his program to have earned some of those rights back — like the right to life with his own family, the right to be trusted enough to be responsible for himself — will be responsible for you while you start to look at what drugs did to your life and begin to take control of your life again."

The young person is offered tools of personal change, originally developed by AA, to chisel an individualized program to earn those rights he lost.

"They're a set of spiritual tools of self change," Newton says. "In the first step, you face up to the fact you're powerless, not only over drugs, but over your whole life, as a result of your craving for drugs. And, in order to get sanity back again, you need higher power help.

"Obviously, that's a reference to God as each person understands Him. It's also a reference to instruments of God like other people — like young people in group who are further along in the program than you or like your family."

The second step says you must face being powerless and make a decision about it.

"A decision to commit my life and will to the care of God as I understand Him. Any part of change is committing yourself to higher power care."

The third step involves making a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself.

"That's taking a hard look at myself in a very fearless and ruthless way to see the things I've done that have failed my own values and that were harmful to myself and other people."

The fourth step says you must admit to God, yourself and another person the exact nature of your wrongs immediately.

"Going over that whole business with myself, God and another human being to make sure I'm really being honest. And that takes a little help from God and somebody else."

The fifth step says make amends.

"That is owning up to the things I've done wrong, saying I'm sorry, trying to make up the damage to the people I've hurt — beginning with myself and my family. And then changing the character defects in me that caused me to do that kind of hurt to myself and other people."

The sixth step discusses developing a spiritual life.

"Taking the insights I've learned through the process and getting closer to God through prayer and meditation and growing spiritually."

The seventh step discusses generalizing all the steps in daily life.

"Literally, putting the principles of the previous six steps to practice in all my daily affairs. Part of practicing that is sharing what I've received with other people."

The Straight program also uses the three signs from AA:

Think, think, think. This means not being so abrupt and compulsive about getting things done.

First things first. This means, when you make decisions, think about your priorities — very important when your life is messed up, Newton says.

Easy does it. This means, instead of having to do everything right away, have a kind of ease and serenity about it.

Straight also uses the Serenity Prayer in its program.

"A lot of people destroy their lives by beating their heads bloody on things they can't do anything about in life. And the Serenity Prayer, says:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

"There are a lot of things in life we can't change. We need to accept and live with them."

And the courage to change the things I can.

"Because the principal thing I can change is myself."

And the wisdom to know the difference.

As the young person begins to work on himself, in terms of becoming a responsible, constructive person, he earns his rights back in stages.

During the first phase, the young person works on himself. During the second phase he returns home to work on his family relationship; third phase, he returns to school; fourth phase, he develops friendships and learns to use leisure time constructively. On the final phase, he learns to help those who have helped him.

"A young person earns the right to be trusted. He earns the right to be able to do chores and have responsibility. He earns the right to live with his family. He earns the right to go back to school or work.

"It's essentially doing the work he needs to — to earn his place back in society."