

**MIKE
THE
GREAT**

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Photography by Jonathan Burnette

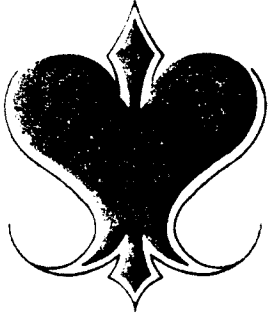
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Straight is a private, non-profit program exclusively for the rehabilitation of youthful drug abusers, between the ages of 12 and 21, and their families.

For further help or information regarding our program contact us at:



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STRAIGHT
A Direction for Youth

DAVID TILLEY
Director - Atlanta

STRAIGHT, INC. DESCRIPTION

Straight, Inc. is a private, non-profit, family oriented, drug-free rehabilitation program for adolescents ages 12 through 25. The program originated in St. Petersburg, Florida in 1976 and our Atlanta program opened on August 15, 1981. We are presently helping approximately 200 youngsters. Our facility will eventually accommodate up to 350 teenagers at any given time who will need help in dealing with the problems associated with drug use.

Straight does not solicit nor accept any form of government funding. We rely solely on client fees and contributions to assist in providing help to youngsters in trouble. Seventy percent of all operating funds are provided by client fees; the remaining thirty percent is provided by business, civic, and individual contributions. One hundred percent of all funds for Capital expenses come from contributions.

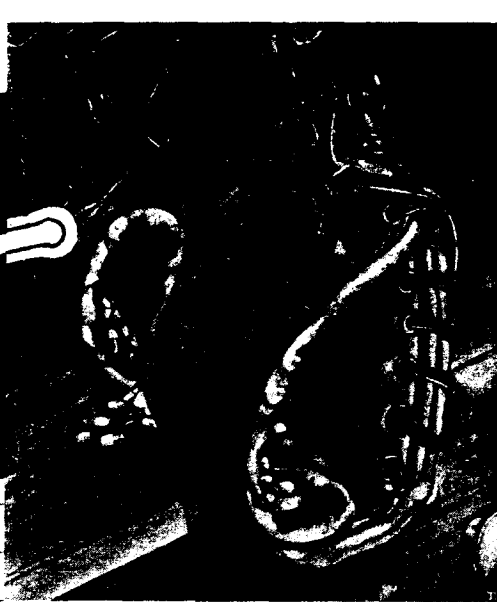
The therapeutic approach of Straight is based in part on Alcoholics Anonymous concept "that those people who have a problem and are recovering can best help other people who have the problem." Straight, therefore, is peers helping peers and families helping families. We not only assist adolescents in getting off drugs, but we help them to change the attitudes which got them into drugs.

Mike the Great

By Robert Coram

The Story of an American Family

Illustration by Jerome Tarpley



Sometimes, in families of three or four children, there is one of bright plumage; one who laughs and hurts with greater intensity than the others; one who sparkles with the exuberance of life — a child who flies from mountaintop to mountaintop and seems destined never to know the dark valleys of life.

Mike was such a child. He went through his first thirteen or fourteen years trailing clouds of glory. He breezed through school the way he breezed through life — excelling without trying. As an athlete he showed championship potential while maintaining his individuality.

Once at baseball practice when all the boys were in the outfield catching fly balls, his parents came to watch and wondered how they would find Mike. Suddenly a baseball glove went sailing high into the air. The kid under it did a fancy-stepping pirouette and caught the glove behind his back. "There he is," his mother said, laughing at his antics.

As a ten-year-old, Mike almost didn't make the ninety-pound football team because he was by far the smallest kid to try out. But he was also the most fearless, and after the team's biggest game he was voted most valuable player and had the most tackles and most assists.

In his football picture from that year, the team members are standing stiff and formal in crisp clean uniforms — all but Mike. He liked to play in the mud and before the picture was taken he had wandered off by himself, practicing sliding and falling. In the picture he is mud-streaked and begrimed with a beautiful grin on his face.

Even as a young child he showed exceptional muscularity and physical development. The pediatrician once asked Mike's mother if he lifted weights. The muscularity later stood him in good stead as a wrestler, where he clearly was destined to be a champion.

Mike sensed, in the simple unaffected way of a child, that he was something special. He used to doodle "Mike the Great" in his notebooks and on scraps of paper. He even

carved "Mike the Great" in his mother's dining-room table.

The family was proud of him. Danny, his towheaded, ten-year-old stepbrother, idolized him and became his shadow.

Danny was the first in the family to know Mike was using drugs. But when Danny told his parents, they didn't believe him. Mike beat his baby brother for being a tattletale.

Danny, with tears in his eyes, looked up from the floor at his brother and said, "I don't care how many times you beat me up. As long as you keep on using drugs, I'm going to keep telling on you."

□

Dee, Mike's mother, is forty-two, looks ten years younger, and has no reef points in her mainsail. She is independent, headstrong, and outspoken. "We put her in the closet when we have company," her family used to say of her.

She came from a Boston Irish family where the mother was such a strict Catholic that the four daughters used to refer to her as "the Pope's secretary."

Dee went to a Catholic high school and was graduated from Notre Dame Academy for Girls in Miami. She married young, had three children — Mike was the youngest — and became, so far as anyone could remember, the first person in her family to be divorced.

Twelve years ago, she met Gene — the man who would become her second husband.

Gene was a red, white, and blue Marine Corps captain who had just come home from Vietnam. He was so straight he would not vote in presidential elections because he didn't want his duty as a Marine officer to be affected by his feelings toward whomever would become president.

Gene's auto tag today is "USMC-2," his third choice behind "USMC" and "USMC-1," both of which were taken. He enjoys driving down the road and waving at fellow Marines who toot their horns.

Gene went into the Corps as an enlisted man, got a battlefield commission in Korea, and then in Vietnam was a medal-winning hero as an

aerial observer who called in artillery, naval guns, and air strikes on the Viet Cong.

He had served awhile as a drill instructor and that's how he tried to handle Dee's children when they married — as if he was a drill instructor and they were in boot camp. He fell prey to the Great Santini syndrome in that he believed discipline is the key to life: lay down absolute rules and enforce them.

Gene, when he looks back today, realizes that from the beginning there were major differences between himself and Dee that neither saw until later. "She's got feelings and knows how to express them. This big old ugly Marine can't do that."

Even women like Dee, women of grit and steel, sometimes wear blinders where their children are concerned. She did not want to believe that her eagle, her Mike the Great, was using drugs. Danny, the child of her marriage to Gene, must have been wrong when he said Mike used drugs. And if Mike were on drugs, what could she do? How could she respond? Was it only marijuana? It's probably a phase he's going through, she thought: he may be experimenting but that's all there is to it.

But eventually she asked. She found out that several of Mike's closest friends smoked marijuana and, in a casual, offhand way, said to her son, "I guess you've tried it, too."

"Yeah," he said. "I tried it once."

Dee tried not to be shocked or angry or hurt. She wanted to understand her son. But she is of the generation before drugs. She did not understand. And, in that moment, her heart almost broke.

Gene's response was to intensify the militarylike discipline. He ordered that when Mike left the house, he must phone in every hour to report his location and activities. Ostensibly there was a change for the better in Mike.

Two months later Mike and his mother were at a nearby shopping center when they saw a big group of his friends. "They're either high or drunk," Mike said casually.

"Really," Dee said. "How do you know?"

"Look at their eyes," he said in a

patronizing fashion.

Dee turned to Mike and impulsively asked, "Are you on marijuana a lot?"

He exploded in anger. "I'm sorry I ever mentioned that to you. I should never have told you I tried it. Now you'll think I smoke all the time."

Mike slammed up what his mother called his "Iron Wall." He did not speak for hours.

Dee was guilty and contrite and apologetic and resolved never to mention drugs again to him.

□

The high school wrestling coach was surprised when Mike resigned from the team. The youngster had great promise. And his teacher was surprised one day when Mike, who had been a good student, stood up in class, ripped up a test, said, "I'm cutting class. What are you going to do about it?" and walked out.

Several weeks later Mike was arrested at a football game for being drunk on school property. During a scuffle with police he broke a \$100 gold neckchain that his mother had given him. She came to jail to bail him out.

"Don't look at me like that. Hit me. Scream at me. But don't look at me that way," he pleaded.

Dee believed her son when he said he had not been drinking but had been with friends who were drinking. She would not know until much later that her son had been on drugs for three years.

Dee and Gene began to watch Mike more closely. They could not believe he would lie to them. But something was not right. Mike seemed to sleep all the time. He would come in about 4:30 p.m., go to his room, shut the door, and go to sleep. He had a constant, hacking cough. Often he would get up during the night and drink half a bottle of cough medicine. There was so much congestion in his chest that the family doctor thought he might have pneumonia. His eyes were always red and light-sensitive — he constantly used Visine.

Dee found it difficult to confront Mike directly.

"Who do you know that is on drugs?" she once asked.

"None of my friends," he exploded defensively. "Why don't you get off my back? All you do is hassle me."

Gene had retired from the Corps and was finding civilian life much more complicated than the military. The heavyset, cigar-smoking ex-Marine bounced around in several jobs, then went to work for a local utility company.

His authoritarian ways with Mike were not working. The boy sometimes talked of his "real father" and drew apart from Gene. Dee thought Gene was too rough on her son. Tension began to grow between the parents.

Dee wanted to take Mike to a psychiatrist. Gene was opposed to the idea. "Psychiatrists are talking doctors. We used doctors like that to get rid of crappy Marines."

But he loved his wife and wanted to save his marriage. He took Mike to the psychiatrist. After a session with the boy the psychiatrist came out, sat down, and told Gene there was a difference between hard drugs and marijuana. "Why, after a long hard day at the office, I go home to my girl friend, where the two of us get high on marijuana."

"You do what?" Gene grunted with narrowed eyes.

"We smoke a couple of joints," the psychiatrist said in the patient way one speaks to a child.

"You smoke joints and you want to talk to my son about his drug problem?" Gene exclaimed. He took Mike home.

Mike was beginning to feel the world closing in on him. He goaded his stepfather for his authoritarian ways. He played his mother against Gene, taking special pains to accentuate his own goodness and to ingratiate himself with her.

"Hey, Mom, want me to cut the grass?" he would ask on a Thursday or Friday. Afterwards, while his mother was in a good mood, he would ask if he could have the car that night.

Gene saw through it. When Mike went out and did not call in as he had been instructed, Gene grounded him — no going out for a while.

"My real dad is so cool," Mike said one night in a fit of petulance. "I want to be like him. I want to live with him."

"What are you talking about?" Dee exploded. "You haven't seen him since you were two years old. He doesn't even know where you are."

Mike insisted. It took his mother two days of phone calls to track down her first husband in Las Vegas. Mike packed a suitcase and left home that summer. He was sixteen.

His father was a drug dealer. He introduced his son to cocaine and PCP. But after eight weeks he was tired of playing daddy and sent Mike home.

When Mike arrived in the Atlanta airport late one evening there was no one to meet him. He sat around the airport for several hours, then called and asked his mother if he could come home.

By now the steel in his mother was beginning to show. "You can come home," she said. "But there is a new rule in this house — the golden rule. You'll have to live by it."

"The golden rule. What's that?"

"He that has the gold, rules," Dee said. "This is my home. It is not a motel or a teenage rest home. If you come back there will be no more drugs."

Mike never paused. He said okay.

When he came in the house, his suitcase was half full of drugs he had brought back from Las Vegas: marijuana, prescription pills, and cocaine. Mike and his mother talked until 3:00 a.m. They talked alone because by then Gene and Dee had separated.

Mike's older brother, Jack, stopped talking to him that fall. Jack knew about the drugs. When he came home from college on the weekends he would sometimes nod tightly at his younger brother. But he never spoke. Jack was himself a star

high school athlete, who, although not gifted with natural ability, had always been successful through sheer determination. The deterioration of his little brother not only disgusted him, it frustrated him because he could not help. As Mike withdrew one way his brother also backed away and renounced their association.

But Danny still idolized Mike. One night when he wanted to go to a movie at a nearby shopping center, Mike volunteered to take him. Mike left Danny in the movie and walked outside to buy cocaine. He did not know Danny followed and watched. When the two came home, the younger brother told his mother.

"I'm tired of that kid telling lies on me," Mike shouted. When his mother wasn't looking, he pulled over a piece of heavy furniture on Danny's foot. He said it was an accident.

Dee visited the northwest Atlanta school where Mike was a student. "My son is on drugs," she said to the principal. "I want to stop it."

It took awhile for her to convince him she did not want to make trouble. He was not used to parents taking an interest in drug abuse: most parents threatened to sue if the subject were brought up. He and his teachers had learned to say nothing. He was relieved that one mother wanted to crack down, and he promised to help.

Dee had neighbors watch her house after she left for work in the mornings. If Mike did not catch the school bus, she called a few moments later and said, "Why didn't you get on the bus? What are you doing there? Who's in my house? Get them out in five minutes or I'll have the police there."

If Mike drove away with friends before the school bus came, she called the principal and told him her son probably had drugs on his person, that she wanted him pulled out of class and searched.

Once, in desperation, she asked, "If you're using drugs, why do you go to school? I know you're leaving almost as soon as you get there. You're making D's and F's and about to flunk out. Why do you even go?"

He looked at her in amazement. "Because that's where you go to get high. I buy stuff on the school bus or at school, get high, then skip."

Dee was watching her son change before her eyes. He never doodled "Mike the Great" anymore. Once, when they were talking, he suddenly picked up a screwdriver, placed it against his chest, and said, "I'd like to stick this right in my heart."

"Mike!" his mother shouted. He shrugged and laughed sardonically. "You might as well have fun today. You could die tomorrow."

Once, when he was away, she searched his room and found marijuana hidden in his winter jacket, jammed down in socks, and taped behind the dresser.

"My God!" she exclaimed, standing there with packages of the drug. "If the house burns down, the entire neighborhood will be high for a week."

When Mike came home, he went to his room. After a while he came out, something clearly on his mind. Finally, he blurted out, "Do you know who's been in my room?"

"I was in your room," she replied stiffly. "Where's all my stuff?" he demanded angrily.

"Do you want it back?"

"Yes."

"No way."

"You don't have any right to take my stuff out of my room."

"This is my home. I make the rules. I have a right to do anything I want."

Mike stormed out of the house in anger.

A few weeks later, Dee was working in the yard and found a stash of rum, vodka, beer, and marijuana under a pile of rocks.

Mike, although unable to change, regretted the pain he was causing his mother. He felt responsible for her separation from Gene. To ease the guilt he began using even more drugs.

He was growing marijuana in the woods behind his house. His best friend, who lived next door, had more than one hundred marijuana plants in the basement. The boy told his parents he was growing Chinese tomato plants for a school project. Another friend planted a half-acre of marijuana on the family's investment property in Cherokee County.

The only time Mike was happy was when he was high. He came home late in the afternoon, slept until about midnight, then sneaked out of the house and got high with friends. He came home before his mother got up, dressed, went to school, got high again, then skipped school and roamed with friends all day.

Mike didn't have the money to buy the drugs he needed, so he began dealing. Three students in his school were the main dealers. They drove Porsches and BMWs and dealt directly with big-time Atlanta dealers. Each had a dozen or so pushers around school. Even the teachers were afraid of these three boys, who had achieved a teenage-mafialike reputation for violence. Mike became one of their better pushers.

In the meantime things had gone sour for Gene at work. He went out on an all-night drunk and did a lot of thinking. He was no longer living at home but he loved his wife and children. He thought of Dee's children as his own. And his overwhelming sense of duty was such that he felt great responsibility for the children.

He knew Mike was no longer making any effort to hide his drug usage. Dee had found pipes and other drug paraphernalia lying in the open. It was almost as if the boy were crying out for help. But Gene felt that nothing he did was any help, either with Mike and his drug problem or with Dee and their marriage.

So, he had not been there two nights earlier when Mike came home, went straight to his room, and shut the door. A few minutes later Danny came into the living room and cried, "Something is wrong with Mike! He can't talk."

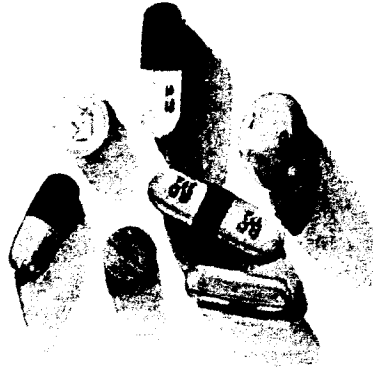
Dee ran to his room. Mike's eyes were glazed. When he moved, his arms flopped about.

"Mike, what is it? What's wrong?" his mother shouted as fear coursed through her.

"I'm tired. Leave me alone," Mike mumbled.

"You can't even speak. Tell me what you're taking," she demanded.

Mike turned away in silence. Later in



the evening, after fruitless attempts to get him to talk, Dee, with a deep pain in her heart, told Mike, "You look around your room. See what you like and take it with you. I don't want you to live here anymore."

When he had partially recovered, Mike picked up his jacket and walked out into the cold rainy night. He did not call his mother on her birthday several days later. She knew he had been coming home during the day because some of his clothes were gone. Once he left a note saying he had done nothing wrong and that he hoped his mother was happy. He signed it, "Your son, Mike."

Then one day he was back. Dee was glad. She wanted her son at home. She still thought she could control the drugs. In the next few weeks she realized she could not.

One day last spring Dee was riding down the road with the sunroof of her Mustang rolled back. "God, I need your help," she prayed aloud. "I need it desperately. I'm about to lose my son. Please help me."

Dee does not look upon God as a cosmic bellhop. She doesn't issue instructions when she prays. She usually simply asks for the strength to do whatever she has to do. She felt with the undefinable instinct of a mother that this time help would be forthcoming because she had finally faced up to the magnitude of Mike's problem. She felt that this time the heavens would have to open and her answer come with a flash of lightning and clap of thunder.

That afternoon her neighbor called. The neighbor's son, once Mike's best friend, had been in a drug-rehabilitation program down in St. Petersburg, Florida, for several weeks. The program was called Straight, Inc. As the children in the program advance, one of the steps calls for making amends or helping those whom they have harmed while using drugs. The neighbor said his son wanted to talk with Dee about Mike.

She did not understand the significance of the call. The next day she was out again, riding and praying. "God, I asked you for help and you're not helping me," she lamented.

Then, not as a clap of thunder but as a still small voice within her own mind, came a reply, "I answered you yesterday." And she knew that somehow the answer to Mike's problems would be found in the trip to Florida to visit her neighbor's son.

Gene, who was trying not to let separation affect his sense of duty as a parent, was opposed. "We know what the problem is. We can handle it ourselves," he said. It was almost exactly what he had said after they made several trips to a marriage counselor: "Okay, now I know what's bothering you. We can work it out ourselves."

But Dee went to Florida with her neighbor. She sat through an open meeting of Straight and was never so shocked, fright-

ened, and apprehensive in all her life. Her emotions and raw nerve ends were flayed by what she saw and heard. Girls, so young they appeared not to have reached puberty, stood up and talked of how they had been prostitutes to raise money for drugs or how they had traded sex for drugs with the teachers. They told of buying drugs from teachers; how cops would take drugs from them and not arrest them; of stealing, of group sex, and of an endless list of drugs they had taken.

Dee could not believe that the same situation existed with Mike. But she wondered.

When she talked with her neighbor's son, he was blunt. "Mike has a problem. He needs help. He needs help badly," the boy told her. She talked with the staff of Straight. They agreed to accept Mike but said they had no room for three weeks. On the return trip her neighbor said, "I'll be honest with you. I don't want Mike down there with my boy. I don't know why I even called you. I still don't want Mike down there."

The neighbor knew, in the way that parents often know more about someone else's child than they do their own, how deeply Mike had gone into the drug culture.

Mike overdosed twice on LSD the next week. The second time he fell into a ditch not far from home. While he was hallucinating, he saw his heart outside his chest pumping blood all over his body.

As he was returning to normal, he said aloud, "Look at you, Mike. Your mom is going to find you dead in the ditch."

A few days later word came from Straight: there is an opening. Bring Mike.

Dee told her son that his best friend, whom he knew was in some sort of a treatment program in Florida, was off drugs and wanted to see him. Would he like to ride down?

Mike's first thought was that here was a chance to take drugs to his friend.

"Could I, Mom? That would be really neat."

Dee paused. Then she said, "I'll do anything so you can see what it is like to be normal again and away from your creepy friends."

Mike was so excited he didn't hear her. He packed a suitcase that included a big supply of marijuana and pills and jumped into a car with his mother and Gene for the ten-hour drive to St. Petersburg.

They arrived late one Friday. It would be Saturday morning before Mike could be admitted. Gene and Dee walked the beach that afternoon with Mike. She held onto her son the

whole time. She held his hand, his arm. She stroked his face and shoulders. She hurt for him. She hurt because she was deceiving her son about why they were in Florida. Somehow she kept from crying.

After dinner that evening Mike stood up and casually said, "Think I'll go out and get something cold to drink." He walked back to the beach and got high.

The next morning the three of them drove to Straight.

"You and Daddy wait outside while I make sure everything is okay," Dee said.

Gene smoked his cigar and watched Mike.

Dee was inside a long time.

Mike grew increasingly nervous. "You aren't planning to leave me here, are you?" he asked suddenly.

"Do you think you need to be here, Son?" Gene replied slowly.

"No way."

Gene watched the boy out of the corner of his eye. He tried to be casual. But he could not permit Mike to get more than an arm's length away. Gene is big and heavy. Mike is small and fast. If Mike gained two steps, Gene could never catch him.

The deception at which he had become so adroit was Mike's first ploy. "Think I'll get out for a minute."

"Me too, Son," Gene said quickly, determined that Mike would not break and run.

Then Dee was coming out the door towards them and the tense moment had passed. Mike walked into the building between his parents, thinking his friend was waiting.

When Mike walked in he was taken to a small room where he was met by Miller Newton, assistant director of Straight. "Mike, you think you're here to visit your friend. But the fact is you're a druggie yourself. You're here to be helped," he said.

Mike turned a look of pure hatred on Gene and Dee. Then he sat down. It was to be fifty-six days before he would speak to them again.

The longest walk Dee and Gene ever took was from the door of Straight to the door of their car. The mother kept looking over her shoulder. Like every parent who places a child in Straight, she felt that any moment a staff member would come running out to say a mistake had been made; that Mike was not on drugs; that he should not be there; that they should take him home.

But no one came out. Gene and Dee sat in the car a few



"Mike, the truth is, you're a druggie yourself; you're here to be helped."

moments. Neither spoke. They silently wrestled with the demon of doubt. Had placing Mike in Straight been necessary? Wasn't there some other way? Did he really need to be there?

Mike lost count of the fights he was in those first few weeks. He was what Straight staffers call "a real ball-buster." He fought everything and everybody. All he wanted was to go home and be with his drug-using friends. He wanted to get high. He missed the easy sex of the drug culture. He had never seen such a pissant bunch of kids in all his life as were at Straight.

The next few months were physical and emotional hell for Dee and Gene. Each Friday morning they left Atlanta and drove to St. Petersburg for the Friday night meeting. They could not talk to Mike except for a brief message on the PA system during the open meeting. Mike was not yet showing any effort to become what Straight calls "a responsible person" and was granted no privileges. On Saturdays, Dee and Gene often were in meetings with

Straight officials. They had to stay for a Monday night meeting that usually ran until after midnight. Early Tuesday morning they drove back to Atlanta. They worked Wednesday and Thursday then left again on Friday for St. Petersburg.

Gene used all his vacation time on the trips and then began using the sick time his company allocated.

It was with reluctance that Mike stood up at an open meeting several weeks after he entered Straight and told of all the drugs he had taken. He listed them all — alcohol, marijuana, mushrooms, PCP, cocaine, and speed. It was the first time Dee and Gene knew. Such a sense of revulsion and nausea came over Dee that she almost vomited. She learned more about her son in those few moments than he had told her in the past few years. He stood up and told all those people he had been taking drugs four and a half years. How could she have not known?

Dee picked up the microphone at the meeting and said, "Mike, I put you here because I love you. You're going to stay because I love you. You're here to learn.

I've been very weak in the past. I thought I was strong but I wasn't where you're concerned. Well, I'm resigning as Mother of the Year. You can now consider me the toughest mother in the valley because, son, you are here to stay. You had better get serious about this program."

Later, at a meeting among the parents of children in the Straight program, several mothers stood up and said how relieved they were; how happy they were now that they knew their children were safe; how now they could sleep well for the first time in years.

Dee stood up and said she was mad as hell. She said her life had been disrupted; that her drug-using son had ripped her life apart; that she resented everything remotely connected with drugs.

"From the time a mother is pregnant, she knows someday she will have to give up her child. But not usually until the child is about twenty-one. My son is only seventeen. I resent having to give him up. I'm not through mothering him. I want him home. He's still my little boy."

Because their only contact with Mike was as spectators at the open meetings, Dee and Gene had no way of knowing what was going on with Mike. Most of the news was bad. Fights. Resistance. No desire to change. But in the back rooms of Straight, where the long therapy sessions and the brutally candid talks take place, where the sacred process of changing children's lives goes on, Mike, too, was beginning to change.

One of the pivotal points was when he slugged his "old comer," a more advanced Straight kid whose responsibility was to help Mike. The only reaction of the boy was to say, "Did that make you feel better? Do you think it accomplished anything?"

Mike was in awe of someone who had so much control.

Like all the true "ball-busters" who come to Straight — those kids who resist the most — once they make the commitment to change, their progress is swift and sure.

The minimum time to move from First Phase, when the therapy sessions begin, into Second Phase at Straight is fourteen days. Mike's fifty-six days was a near-record length of time. But he was to make up for lost time. He made Second Phase, then moved along to where he could visit his parents on weekends. The talks they

shared those weekends marked the first time the three of them had ever really talked. The conversations were intense and often lasted far into the morning. Once, while he and his mother were talking, Mike crawled like a baby across the bed, buried his face in her lap, and wept. After a while, he blew his nose, wiped his eyes, grinned and stammered, "You're a neat mom."

With tears splashing down onto his face, Dee smiled, stroked his hair, and said gently, "Yeah, and you're a neat kid."

Mike returned to school near the Straight headquarters. The lowest grade he has made since then was eighty-five, and his last report card was solid A's. "Mom, I'm smart as crap," he said one day, more in a sense of discovery than immodesty.

Recently it came out in class that Mike was one of the Straight kids. Several students ridiculed him. "You've been brainwashed over at Straight," they laughed.

Mike stood up and retorted, "Hey. If being brainwashed means going from F's to straight A's; if being brainwashed means having goals, not doing drugs anymore, and not having police cars coming to my house and arresting me for breaking and entering; if being brainwashed means having a great family relationship, then you're right, I'm brainwashed. But I think I've got it all together for the first time in my life."

There was a long moment of silence. Then the star of the football team, a boy everyone in school respected, spoke: "Mike's got more guts than anybody in this room."

Gene and Dee now alternate weekends in St. Petersburg. Gene recently took Danny and a reporter down there. He picked up a bag of white seedless grapes and a big bottle of root beer, both favorites of Mike.

Mike hugged Gene and his little brother, then crawled into the backseat of the car and began talking. "You know, Dad, I think of you all the time," he said with surprising candor. "I'm realizing every day how much I've come to accept you as my father. I love you and Mom. I know one day you'll be gone and that scares me because I really love you."

Gene blinked, bit his cigar, mumbled, "Thank you, son" and did his best not to destroy the belief that Marines don't cry.

Mike's older brother was down in Florida a month or so ago. Jack was cautious. He and Mike had not spoken a half-dozen words in over eighteen months. There was long-standing hostility between them because of the drugs. When Mike saw Jack he broke into a big grin, threw his arms around his brother's neck, and said, "I love you."

Jack backed away a half step. Mike laughed. "What's the matter, big brother? Afraid of your feelings? You better get used to it because I'm going to hug you and tell you I love you whenever I feel like it."

Dee recently started a new job as a salesperson. She was to be on commission six months but did so well she came off in one month. She will earn more than she ever thought possible

this year. "I have more potential than any salesman in Atlanta," she exclaims with new bravado. When her company has an account that no other salesperson can crack, they send in Dee.

Placing Mike in Straight was the hardest thing she ever did. But since then, three local mothers have buried their sons — all friends of Mike — for drug-related reasons and she knows what she did was right.

While she wants more than anything else to give Mike his life back, she knows that, in a sense, she has lost her son forever. He has found a maturity and poise and serenity that will forever preclude his being his mother's little boy.

There is no happy ending to this story. There are no neat ribbons to tie around the package. There is no way to say, "They all lived happily ever after."

Everyone in this family has had his or her life changed forever by Mike's drug usage.

Dee has become a late-blooming overachiever but often wonders if it is really important.

Gene, who has become patient and understanding, has about him an air of quiet desperation. He has learned too much too late and still hopes his marriage will work out even as it appears to crumble about him. He continues to hope and to believe.

"There is nothing in my stubborn aggressive background, nothing at all, that could ever have come into my life that would have affected me this way. I was a blamer. I was a taker. Now my druggie kid is bringing our family back together," he said recently.

Mike continues to bloom. Just the other day, Straight executives chose four kids — out of the more than two hundred who applied — to train as paraprofessionals who would help new kids in the program. Mike was one of the four.

The other night, while Dee was in St. Petersburg, she and Mike sat around the table talking far into the night. He played with a pencil as they talked. Dee glanced idly down where he was doodling on a piece of paper. Scalding tears leaped to her eyes. Across the paper, replete with curlicues and fancy marks, was written "Mike the Great." ■



Mike
The Great

The Way Back Is a Straight, Inc., Line

Their faces are the clear unlined faces of children but their eyes burn with the fire of those who have tumbled into a deep pit, wrestled with dark monsters, and then emerged triumphant into sunlight.

Nothing prepares a person for his first sight of these children. Visitors attending a Friday night open meeting of Straight, Inc., stand waiting on the cold cement floor of an outer room in the new building on the northern edge of St. Petersburg, Florida. A visitor knows that behind the closed inner doors is a room full of adolescent drug abusers — kids who have run away from home, been kicked out of school, or have tangled with the law. Many have physically attacked their parents. They have been liars, cheats, sneaks, and the slickest con artists in the world. Many have stolen family possessions and sold them to get money for drugs. Some of them, both boys and girls, have sold their bodies for drug money. Their main goal in life, for months or even years, has been to "get high." Most of them have overdosed several times. Few in the crowd have not had a close friend die either from an overdose or a traffic accident while "high" on drugs.

Straight is the end of the line for most of these kids. They have been everywhere else.

Doug Hemminger is a prime example. He came to Straight three years ago when he was seventeen. He had dropped out of school in the tenth grade. He had taken drugs for five years, and been arrested thirteen times. He had been through a host of drug-treatment programs, psychiatrists, probation officers, and police. He had at times stood on the front lawn throwing rocks at his house and screaming obscenities for neighbors to hear. He once threw his mother, who has multiple sclerosis and walks with a cane, across the kitchen and slammed her into the refrigerator.

When there was nowhere else to go, Doug was sent to Straight.

That's how most of these kids get here: they are sent. Few come voluntarily. Some are sent in handcuffs, accompanied by police, and under court order. Some are accompanied by weeping parents who have told them it's either go to Straight or go to jail. Sometimes they come thinking that being at Straight will keep them out of jail. Often it does. But police have come here and taken children away to answer for their crimes. One of the saddest cases involved a nine-year-old boy charged with armed robbery which was committed while he was under the influence of LSD.

Sometimes the children have so intimidated their parents the youngsters are, by necessity, deceived into believing they are visiting friends. They don't know until they are inside they are there to be helped.

Every child voluntarily signs himself in. Sometimes it takes hours to convince the new "intake" do this. He is often defiant, aggressive, and contemptuous. He wants only to return to his drug-using friends. At every step the paraprofessionals meet him with affection but with no tolerance for lying.

"When you've been a liar and a cheat, you can recognize another liar and cheat. You can't con a con," Doug Hemminger says.

Miller Newton, assistant director of Straight, often conducts the intakes. He lets the new kids know that he runs the show; that this is his turf; that he knows what's going on; and that honesty is the Number One rule.

Everything associated with their former lifestyle is taken away from the new kids. Boys must wear shirts with sleeves and collars. No see-through shirts, concert shirts, or shirts with writing are allowed. Jeans must be clean and have no holes. Girls cannot wear jewelry, but must wear brasieres. No slangy drug-culture language is allowed. "Reefer" or "weed" becomes "pot" or "marijuana." No "for real," "far out," or "Hey, man" jargon is allowed.

Nor are boy-girl relationships allowed. Some have a difficult time in the beginning with this separatist rule since the drug culture is usually sexually hyperactive.

Typically, a boy comes into the program, goes into the first meeting, and begins eyeing the girls. He thinks he has a clear field because the other boys spend a lot of time singing patriotic songs such as "Grand Old Flag" or religious songs such as "Walk in the Spirit," or what he considers Mickey Mouse stuff such as "Zippity Do Dah."

The girls ignore his frank and open appraisal for several days. Then

one day a girl stands up in a therapy session, asks the boy to get on his feet, looks him square in the eye, and lashes out. "I'm tired of you looking at me like I am a piece of meat. I'm not some of that trash you're used to being with. Your Mr. Macho crap won't cut it around here. None of us appreciate what you are doing. You'd better start showing me, and every other girl here, some respect."

The boy, humiliated in front of several hundred youngsters, wonders what is going on. The girls sit on the other side of the room. The boys talk of "getting motivated" and "having goals." They talk of rebuilding family relationships, returning to school, wanting to contribute to society, what God means to them, and what a great country they live in. Several kids have even come up to the boy and said, "You know, I was just like you. I did all the things you did and more. I care about you, I want to be your friend. If you let me, I'll be the best friend you ever had."

When a child comes to Straight he is in the First Phase. He has nothing but the clothes on his back and he must earn every privilege. Throughout his rigidly controlled twelve-hour-days he is in the company of another youngster who, as a symbolic gesture, holds him by the belt as they move about the building or grounds. Some of the new kids try to run. They disrupt therapy sessions. They laugh and ridicule others in the program. Until the new person begins to respond and participate he is not allowed to speak or move without supervision.

After he becomes a "responsible person" he advances to Second Phase, in which he must learn to establish priorities and straighten out his family relationships.

In the Third Phase he returns to school and goes to Straight after school and on weekends. In the Fourth Phase his goals are to develop friendships and learn how to use lei-



Photography by Ricardo Ferrer

Director Jim Hartz explains the harsh realities of Straight: it's a long and tough journey away from drugs.