

DRUG-TREATMENT CENTER EMBROILED IN CONTROVERSY CRITICS CALL TOUGH TECHNIQUES ABUSIVE; SUPPORTERS SAY HOOKED TEENS GET CLEAN - CONTROVERSIAL PROGRAM

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The new teens in the program are pinned to the floor when they act out of line.

They are watched while using the toilet. They are kept away from their parents for weeks, shuffled from stranger's house to stranger's house.

Sometimes they sleep on floors.

Former client John [REDACTED] calls it "brainwashing."

"It is hell," he said.

Patricia [REDACTED] calls it heaven.

"It saved my daughter's life and our marriage and it brought our family closer together," the Palm Beach Gardens resident said.

When it comes to the most controversial drug-treatment program in Palm Beach County, Growing Together in Lake Worth, officials are taking notice.

A judge now refuses to order children to be treated there. The state has threatened to revoke its license. And a psychiatrist contends one teen now suffers post traumatic stress syndrome -- like a Vietnam War veteran.

On the other side stands a long line of parents and center officials. The program works, they say.

Youngsters stay in treatment as long as it takes to kick their habits -- even two years -- at a price of usually less than \$10,000, considerably below the \$20,000 to \$70,000 needed for two months at some competitors. Some firm believers in the methods took their children to a similar Sarasota program before Growing Together opened in Lake Worth in 1987.

Several parents tried other teen drug-treatment centers first.

"It just became a crisis situation. I was sure he was going to kill himself," Carolyn [REDACTED] said of her crack-cocaine-abusing son, now in Growing Together after going through counseling in Hollywood.

"This is a kid who never would go to school. He got all F's, incompletes," [REDACTED] of Pembroke Pines said. "This January, he got five A's and two B's. I'm not saying it works for everybody, but this is a real positive thing. This is a kid who's feeling good about himself."

The controversy boils down to a few sticky questions. County mental health commissioner Jim Robinson asks, does drug addiction warrant stopping at nothing to kick the habit -- even using practices that might be construed as abusive?

And parents ask, why pick on a program that works? And where else are they to turn for low-cost drug treatment?

Growing Together is a private, non-profit center that embraces peer pressure. Teens teach teens principles meant to keep them off drugs. Newcomers do not talk to their parents for weeks or months. No television. No music. No privileges allowed until they have earned them. They sleep at the homes, sometimes on the floor, of other teens more advanced in the program. Where they sleep can change from night to night.

The tone is radically different from Glenbeigh Hospital, Anon-Anew, Lake Hospital and other drug-treatment programs. Trained therapists, typically with master's degrees, counsel youngsters individually and in groups. Youngsters sleep at the centers. They leave after about 30 days. They often can attend fitness programs and art classes.

Officials now are watching Growing Together because of a case involving a 15-year-old Coral Springs girl. After the girl, Dana, started treatment at Growing Together, her mother complained to the judge who had sent her there.

Do something to help her, the mother pleaded to Circuit Judge Michael Gersten.

Dana walked into the center as a rebellious teen, her parents said.

Fifteen months later, she was suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, Coral Springs psychiatrist Dr. Stephen Moskowitz wrote in February. Her "spirit and sense of confidence has been totally crushed."

Gersten referred the mother's complaint to the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, and said he would no longer order treatment at Growing Together.

John █████, 20, thinks the psychiatrist understood the situation well.

"I was always contemplating how to kill myself when I was in there," said █████ of suburban Atlanta, who spent two months at the center. "It's just constant badgering and torture -- I consider it torture. The whole thing is brainwashing. ... All they do is they break down your mind in a period of two years."

He woke up each day at 5 a.m. after five hours of sleep. A few teen-agers would lead him by his belt loops to the breakfast table, where they decided how much he would eat, depending on how well he behaved, █████ said. He then was driven to the Growing Together center on Lucerne Avenue.

All morning and afternoon, he sat on a church pew, █████ said. Teens led him by his belt loops to the bathroom and to meals at noon and 5 p.m. From 5:30 to 8 p.m., he sat in the pew, not moving. Teens talked about their drug problems and sang. At 8 p.m., he was driven to a home of a teen-ager more advanced in the program.

█████ said he plotted suicide. He was in the rigorous first phase, the boot camp of the seven-stage program, his entire two months.

The rigors got to him, he said.

When he misbehaved, five teens would pin him face down to the floor, one teen kneeling on each leg and arm and on his torso. He spent an hour like this once, he said.

"I was so numb I couldn't move," █████ said.

The condoned practice of teens restraining teens alarmed HRS' Ric Pavlescak during a recent visit to the center. So did reports of teen-agers having no privacy while using the toilet. And of not having contact with parents until they earn the privilege.

A 15-year-old said he slept in host homes where windows were bolted shut or locked, preventing him from escaping in an emergency. Another boy said he did not know how to go about reporting abuses in the program; state law says clients must be told where to call.

"I am aware of the need for quality adolescent alcohol- and drug-abuse treatment services," HRS District Administrator Robert Williams wrote to Growing Together Executive Director Barbara Griffith on March 8. "I cannot accept, however, practices which are contradictory to the ... statutes of the state, particularly when they jeopardize the health, safety and rights of clients."

The center has until May 8 to comply with the laws governing restraints and seclusions or it could lose its interim license, Williams wrote.

"I'm getting supportive calls from parents," Griffith said. "We are going to be in compliance."

William Blanchard, Growing Together president, declined comment.

It all is much ado about nothing, many parents say.

Sure, a teen will stand by while a newcomer uses the toilet. That makes sure the newcomer does not escape through the bathroom window or try to commit suicide, said Richard █████, whose Jupiter home is a host home.

"They're not sitting there eyeballing them," █████ said.

Yes, youngsters sleep on the floor sometimes, but they do not mind, some host families say.

"They're sleeping on sleeping bags, like when you go camping or something," Patricia █████ said.

And yes, youngsters who strike out are pinned down at times.

"I helped do it because she got outrageous," █████ said of her own daughter. "But she wasn't hurt. You know how a druggie is, they don't know what they're doing. As far as a kid being hurt, I've never heard of one being hurt."

█████ is not surprised that outsiders might think the program is strange.

"I was against it when I first came to it. I hated it, I rebelled to it. I thought, what a bunch of quacks," [REDACTED] said. "It just took time. I've changed. My whole family has changed."

The family unit is an important part of the program. Parents go to counseling sessions, too. As their child progresses, their houses become host homes. The state checks each parent's fingerprints for criminal backgrounds. The state does not visit each home to make sure it is proper for children.

"That's a physically impossible thing to do," HRS' Pavlescak said. However, random checks are made.

Even though Pavlescak finds some problems at Growing Together, he does not think the overall program is bad, he said. The center has its staunch supporters, he said.

"If it had not been for that program, we would not have a home. My husband and I were on the verge of separating," [REDACTED] said. "To me, it's one of the best programs around."

Staff Writers Amy DePaul and Lisa Ocker contributed to this report.

Some differences between Growing Together in Lake Worth and competing teen drug-treatment centers:

TREATMENT

-- GROWING TOGETHER: Graduates and advanced teen-age participants pressure newcomers to conform.

-- TYPICAL PROGRAMS: Trained therapists, typically with master's degrees, counsel teen-agers individually and in groups to get rid of drug habits.

ACCOMMODATIONS

-- GROWING TOGETHER: Newcomers sleep at "host homes" -- homes of teens more advanced in the program.

-- TYPICAL PROGRAMS: Youths sleep in rooms at the center.

LENGTH

-- GROWING TOGETHER: Treatment typically lasts 1 to 1 1/2 years.

-- TYPICAL PROGRAMS: Treatment typically lasts about 30 days.

SOURCES: Growing Together grant application and area drug-treatment programs

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