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HEADLINE: IN DRUG PROGRAM, IS THE CURE A CURSE?

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BODY:

The day Lenny left KIDS of Bergen County, he glimpsed the afternoon sun for the first time in almost two months, the 22-year-old said.

For two months before that July afternoon two years ago, Lenny had participated in daily 12-hour peer counseling sessions designed to snuff out his addiction to drugs and alcohol, and help him rebuild his life.

But in the process, Lenny said, his self-esteem and individuality

were chipped away until he had difficulty coping with life outside KIDS, away from the peers who were the backbone of the program.

"I wasn't me anymore, I was them. I thought what they thought, I did what they wanted me to. I could feel a sense of brainwashing," he said.

Drug treatment professionals say complaints of brainwashing or programming, as well as physical abuses, are possible when treatment relies on nonprofessional counselors and absolute control of clients. It is too easy for tyranny to eclipse therapy when teen-agers have authority over other teen-agers, said David Rosenker, program director of Louis House North, an adolescent treatment program in Blaine, Minn.

Some of Lenny's contemporaries who were in KIDS, a facility in Hackensack, also said they suffered after they left the program: It made them indecisive, afraid of strangers, afraid to watch television, listen to music, or use the telephone, they said. Some adolescents claimed they were physically abused while in KIDS.

Bergen County Prosecutor Larry J. McClure is conducting an inquiry into allegations of mistreatment at KIDS.

Brian Connelly, who formerly served as KIDS's marketing director, called KIDS a "minimum security correctional institution." Mary Kempka, a Saddle Brook mother who removed her son from KIDS, described it as a "Marine boot camp." Its detractors claim the program torments its clients, stripping them of their sense of self and their ability to think for themselves; that in its secrecy and control of individuals it operates in a manner more like a cult than a rehabilitation center.

"There's nothing left of them," said Mrs. Kempka.

But to its defenders, the program (whose name apparently is not an acronym) works miracles in transforming deeply troubled teen-agers into upright, self-respecting, and productive individuals.

Miller Newton, who founded and directs KIDS, declined numerous

requests for interviews for this article. But recently, he and several clients he selected to be interviewed denied allegations of abuse. He said he abhors violence, and that clients are in no way mistreated.

Newton also has said that KIDS is the most effective program available for teen-age addicts. Said Newton: "We may not be perfect, but at this point, we have the highest success rate."

Several participants in the program said they were grateful to the program for giving them back their families and their sobriety. Christy ██████, a peer counselor, said, "I've just become myself. That's the world, and I am part of it, just like anyone else."

During the first phase of the program, which in some cases has lasted more than a year, former participants said, they are led around by more advanced teen-agers, who keep a hand on their shoulder or a finger in their belt loop.

Critics blame the strict regime for creating division and anguish among family members. A 30-page "treatment agreement" for minors, supplied by two parents, spells out 140 rules. Families, for example, are forbidden to discuss or mention any aspect of the program or treatment with anyone outside of the program. Parents are not allowed to know where their children sleep during the first phase of treatment, when clients are sent to "host homes" at night.

The agreement, or contract, also requires that when the client stays at the host family's house, a more advanced client must sleep in front of the bedroom door, apparently to impede escape. Under the contract, parents who sign the document also relinquish "all claims for false imprisonment, assault, harassment, and threats of any kind."

The spectre of mistreatment has drawn the attention of professionals in drug treatment, some of whom say extremism and unnecessary risks are inherent in the kind of treatment and philosophy used at KIDS.

Professionals, among them certified substance abuse and alcoholism counselors, physicians, drug treatment program directors, and county and

state officials in substance abuse treatment, said the method of treatment KIDS uses borders on institutionalization in its rigidity, a situation that can nurture excessive dependency on the program.

They also said therapy that relies primarily on peer counseling promotes incompetent, and even abusive, treatment.

"Peer counseling can be helpful, but to rely on it as a basic modality of treatment is a mistake," said Bob Bedell, Bergen County alcoholism coordinator. "Kids don't have the maturity, the wide background that is really necessary to do in-depth counseling of substance abusers."

Thomas Perrin, a former alcoholism counselor, said the program is based on excessive control. "It's a question of philosophy. What do you want for an end product? Do you want a robot, or someone who can think and act for himself?"

Peer interaction and support is widely regarded as a key component of successful recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. Peer counselors "do understand. They've been there before," said Dr. Preston Zucker, associate professor of pediatrics at Albert Einstein Medical School and a supporter of KIDS for teen-agers who have failed in other programs.

But professionals also say that peer counselors know only one road to recovery, their own, and are resistant to any other. The result, experts said, is that peers tend to rigidly perpetuate the system with which they are familiar, regardless of its appropriateness for other clients.

Newton opened KIDS two years ago in a Hackensack medical complex after leaving his post as clinical director of Straight, a Florida-based drug treatment program that was investigated by state officials for similar abuses.

KIDS mixes substance abusers with adolescents who have eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa, using one treatment method for both groups.

That treatment method relies primarily on marathon group-counseling

sessions led by "peer counselors," other teen-agers and young adults who are recovering addicts and graduates of KIDS. Teens with authority also include lower-ranking former "druggies" who have not yet completed the program, and counselors who are in training internships at KIDS.

Newton has said the peer counselors are more qualified than adult counselors with advanced degrees because they spend hundreds of hours in clinical training at KIDS.

The essential philosophy underlying the treatment, said Newton, lies in a conviction that if peer pressure got the teen-agers into drugs and alcohol, it can get them out.

One former peer counselor, 16-year-old Sharon, said she found the pressures of doubling as a high school student and peer counselor overwhelming. While in training to become a paid peer counselor, a process that involved facilitating group "raps" with other peer counselors, she ran away from the program.

When she was brought back to the program, she was removed from her counseling position and set back to the initial phase of treatment. In May, her mother removed her from the program permanently, sensing her discouragement, Sharon said.

Lenny said the peer counseling sessions, while at their best promoting friendship and understanding, could become extreme. "It was one thing to confess to doing drugs," said Lenny. "It's another thing to confess to reading the back of a Raisin Bran cereal box." During the first phase of treatment, clients are not allowed to read.

The problem, said Todd [REDACTED], a Teaneck youth who ran away from KIDS last January, is "that peer counselors are up there to show you they've got the power and you don't."

GRAPHIC: Color photo - Miller Newton, "We may not be perfect"

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