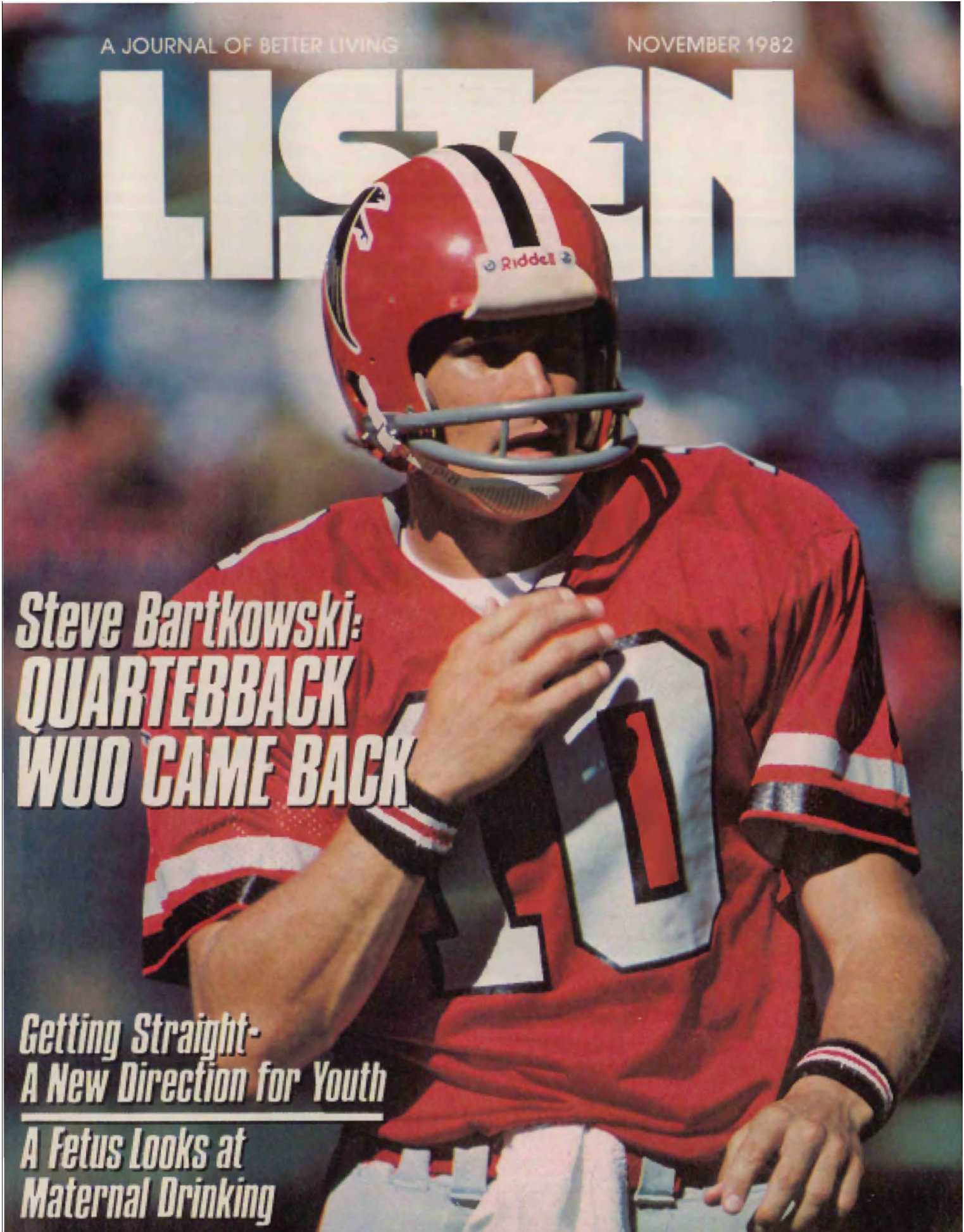


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LISTEN



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*Getting Straight-
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GETTING STRAIGHT



Listen talks with Dr. Miller Newton, director of Straight, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida

What is the origin of your organization's name?

STRAIGHT is the word druggie kids use in talking about kids who don't use drugs, aren't promiscuous, don't steal, and don't look as if they have just been "drugging" out in the alley. So we took the term and used it as a positive statement of a set of morals and a life-style.

How widespread is this program?

When it was started about six years ago, Straight was never intended to be anything other than a local program in the St. Petersburg, Florida, area. We expanded first to Sarasota. Then, since we had about 200 families represented from

the Atlanta area, our next move was there, then to Cincinnati. We currently have 70 or more from the Washington, D.C., area and now have an organizing committee opening up a branch there.

What is the average kid like when he comes into your program?

Usually resentful, antagonistic, out of school, dirty, unkempt, given to radical swings in moods, totally immoral in terms of relationships with the opposite sex, in trouble with the law, tight, unhappy-looking—all these things.

On what is the program of Straight based?

On self-discipline, very strong self-discipline.

The start of going back to drugs is the loss of daily self-discipline, such as in family disagreements, the loss of school goals, and the failure to deal with negative emotions. The lack of inner discipline in one's life sets up bad feelings, which in time lead to renewed drug use. You've got to deal with your feelings constructively every day to remain drug-free.

This sounds quite all-inclusive. Is drug use all that pervasive for the user?

Yes. Drug use affects one's physical health, one's sense of self-worth, one's family relationships, one's ability to socialize with other people. Also it affects the whole motivation system about learning, growing, and achieving. It affects one's sexuality, the male-female relationships. It affects every dimension of life—all in a destructive way.

Where does Straight begin to work on this gloomy scene?

We literally say to the new kid who walks through the door, "You've really screwed up your life. You can't manage your life, so we're going to manage it for you." Every newcomer is put under the charge of a youngster who is sufficiently recovered to be in charge of himself. The kids are pressed to start talking about themselves, about the drugs they used, how they behaved, the trouble they got into, and the feelings that went with it.

Other kids in the program help out in all this, since they've been through the experience before and can tell when the newcomer isn't telling the truth or is hiding part of his story.

How then does the recovery process begin for this newcomer?

Each youngster memorizes the seven steps, which are our condensation of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Also they learn the Serenity Prayer and the five rational criteria which the kids use as a set of personal self-change tools in examining themselves.

Each night on the program they write a moral inventory. This is an exercise dealing with problems in their lives and how to solve them, with the setting of goals and giving themselves credit for constructive personal characteristics and qualities they've developed.

The kids learn to deal with their past but at the same time learn the tools to use in making changes from that past.

Does this mean that the kids in the Straight program are isolated from their families and their peers?

No. Actually the first phase is the only one in which he is isolated, and this may average about a month and a half. The decision to allow a kid into the next phase is made on the basis that the newcomer has been totally honest about his past, has started to make changes, feels good about himself, and is relatively trustworthy to be at home with his own family.

In the second phase he goes home occasionally

and starts to work on family relationships. Later in this phase he begins to take on newcomers himself, thus becoming an "oldcomer."

The third phase widens the picture of activity. The youngster starts back to school or work. Here we're working on motivation and the setting and meeting of goals. Also the contacts with society are becoming wider, including possible contacts with previous friends who use drugs. This provides the opportunity to learn how to say No.

Even more space is allowed in phase four. The kids have three days off during the week so as to give opportunity for them to learn to manage time, choose the best type of friends with whom to spend time, and to broaden their contacts beyond family and their Straight program.

During the fifth phase the kids have four days off and even less-restrictive rules. In a sense they're being pushed away from the program, the main purpose being not to help themselves, but to help the staff. They're in charge of the group, can maintain discipline, and can assume social responsibility.

How can you tell when a kid is ready to "graduate," as it were?

We know when he's gone through all these steps successfully, having learned all the basics and become pretty consistent in his behavior. He's able to handle negative circumstances well without coming apart, without being tempted to run or get high.

He's gone back to his own personal style as a human being and is able to make good decisions.

In contrast to a newcomer in Straight, what is the kid really like when he completes the program?

Usually very open, transparent, honest, feeling good about himself, and feeling positive about life. He's usually highly motivated in achievement areas, including schoolwork. He's committed to friendship activities with positive friends, has high moral values, and is ready to admit failures and do his best to make up the damage. He has a sense of anticipation about life, and is usually religiously active in the framework of the family's faith and belief. Also he's clean-cut in appearance.

Drug users tend to be rather loose in their male-female relationships. How do you control that phase during the treatment program?

We don't let the girls and guys have any contact with each other, other than in groups, sitting on opposite sides of the room.

In later phases of the program we begin to permit recreational activities with other kids, by program permission, but not on a one-to-one basis with the same number of boys and girls.

There's no actual dating for six months after graduation so that they can stabilize their drug-free life-style without the program controls—just them and their family. When they're really comfortable with themselves, they can begin dating.

These seem to be very strict regulations. Do the kids

accept them without objecting?

Yes and no. New kids do not come willingly. No chemically dependent person, including an adult drunk, goes into treatment willingly.

However, they gradually come to the realization that it was really the drug use and behavior that got them into trouble, not their parents, or the principal, or the judge. They begin to understand that they can forgive themselves, make amends to their family, and can start out again to be a good person.

This is like a weight taken off them, and you can actually see the worried, distressed faces slowly but surely start to become happy and smiling. At that point the kids start to take real pride in having a positive life-style again.

Do you have any problem with kids running away before they really get into the program?

Yes, some, but usually the parents bring them back. The compulsive urge is to run, to get high. This is particularly strong the first 90 days, but it diminishes over the treatment period. But given the total number of youngsters we deal with, the number who split is very small. The reason is the fact that the kids are in a group and that newcomers are never away from oldcomers.

Are these kids detoxified before they arrive?

No. The fact is that most adolescents are not actually addicted, or in other words, physically dependent. The hard thing to treat is the habituation, or emotional dependency, which can result from most of the chemicals of choice of kids today.

Do you ever have a kid coming to your program who has been using only one drug?

In the last 1500 or 1600 youngsters we've never had one that was on a single drug alone. All of them have been multiple users. The base drug of preference with probably 68 percent of the kids is marijuana, alcohol with about 18 percent, and the remaining 14 percent other drugs.

Do you have a high percentage of kids who return to drugs?

Somewhere around 55 percent of all the kids who graduate do not go back to use. Of the 45 percent who go back, about half come back for additional help to get that cleaned up.

Do you think this is mainly because of peer pressure or family problems?

I think it's mainly because of peer pressure, but lack of family strength is part of it. The families who make the most change are those who come to terms with what it means to have a chemically dependent person in the family. They say to the drug user, "We will not tolerate this. If you start to use, out you go, either back to treatment or out otherwise. We will not be part of helping you kill yourself by softening the consequences of your use."

Is what might be termed a spiritual dimension an important part of your program?

Several steps in our series of seven emphasize the importance of the spiritual dimension. And I make that distinction from "religious," since our program serves peoples of all beliefs. We point the kids to their own family's affiliation of belief and encourage them to follow it.

Do you find that most of the kids in the program are nonchurch people?

This is true of the kids, but not of the parents. Many of our parents are very active church members with very clear morals whose kids used to be involved in their church.

Their drug-use period became the time of alienation for these children, when they moved away from belief and faith into a kind of sarcastic antagonism. They've violated their traditional family and religious morals so frequently, they have to justify themselves by being against them.

What do you feel is the most effective part of the Straight program?

We've literally taken the peer pressure that gets kids into drugs and reversed it. We've set up a peer culture that has positive values, in which the upper phasers set the drug-free, constructive lifestyle standards for the newer kids.

When a kid comes in with his family, we assign two kids of the same sex and approximately the same age to deal with the new kid. Their attitude is, "We're going to save this kid's life by reaching him in terms of the troubles he's in and by getting him to face up to his problem and sign into the program. We're literally intervening between this kid's move by drug use toward death and his chance to get his life back."

That's a very strong, tough, loving motivation. It is exciting to be a part of it. ◇

Dr. Miller Newton is the Director of Straight, Inc., a drug rehabilitation program for adolescents in St. Petersburg, Florida. He holds a master of divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in public administration and urban anthropology from Union Graduate School. He is the former executive director of the Florida Alcohol Coalition, a for-

mer consultant to the National Institute of Mental Health, and has served on committees, commissions, and boards of several universities and organizations, including the Tampa Alcohol Community Treatment Services, Inc., and the San Antonio Boys Village. Dr. Newton is a native of Florida, where he lives with his wife and three children. ◇

