

"MY CHILD WAS A WALKING CHEMICAL"

By age 16 she was hooked on all kinds of drugs. Could the peer pressure of other teen-agers possibly get her off the habit?

By ROUL TUNLEY

AS A YOUNG TEEN-AGER, Alison was one of those golden girls—golden hair, golden smile, golden future. Active in church-sponsored activities, she was outgoing and popular. In school, she was an average student.* Then she began to get involved with new friends, kids with unkempt hair and unkempt manners. When she came home, she went directly to her room, locked the door and turned up the rock music. She developed a cough, and she got thinner.

What her family didn't know was that when Alison was 12, some girls at school had talked her into

*Although her name and certain events have been altered, Alison's story is real.

trying pot. Within two years she was mixing drugs with beer and liquor. By 16, the golden girl was on her way to becoming what kids call a "garbage head."

The Last Straw. To get money for drugs, Alison began to deal at school, on the bus—everywhere. She wasn't in class much and when she was, she slept. Her grades plummeted. She lived only to get high. By this time, of course, her family suspected. Says her mother sadly, "My child was a walking chemical."

Alison began to have fits of depression and anger. The family did not know how to cope with her. During one especially heated argument she yelled, "I'm leaving. The

next time you see me, I'll be dead or married!"

She went to Florida with a boyfriend. Her parents heard nothing for months. On her 17th birthday, she called from a hospital. She'd had a miscarriage. She wanted to come home. Her mother agreed, but on one condition: she would have to change—drastically. Alison accepted.

For a while Alison seemed to be doing well. She began seeing a psychiatrist. She went back to school and was earning good grades. Then one night she didn't come home at all. When she did return, she was distraught and shouted, "I've got to get away from all this!" By now her parents had heard of a drug-rehabilitation program that could possibly help her. It was in St. Petersburg, Fla., and it was called Straight.

Involved Parents. Straight was created not by drug-rehabilitation experts but by a group of middle-class parents who, in the early '70s, became frightened by what they saw happening to their children. In some schools, drug experimentation was estimated to involve as many as 75 percent of the students. Marijuana could be bought easily, partly because too few adults took it very seriously. Then the parents' group came upon studies that linked the drug to ailments of the lungs, heart, brain. They also showed that it impedes ability to remember and concentrate, and that 12 percent of drivers involved

in motor-vehicle accidents had drugs other than alcohol in their systems.

The St. Petersburg parents studied every available type of rehabilitation plan. They then devised one that borrowed a little from each—leaning most heavily on Alcoholics Anonymous, with its system of members helping members. In 1976 they launched their program with a handful of kids in a small wooden building. Four months later, enrollment soared to 100 and the program moved to a warehouse. Today it is in a half-million-dollar building constructed with funds raised from the community. (Though it had a federal-government start-up loan, Straight has decided to take no more government money.)

This building holds upwards of 400 boys and girls, ages 13 to 18. Every day from nine in the morning until nine at night, there is an almost continuous rap session. The youngsters sit on folding chairs in a huge room. The sessions are moderated by at least two staff members—usually boys and girls in their late teens who were once "druggies" themselves.

The setting is no-nonsense: stucco and concrete walls, big American flag, inspirational mottoes all around. But the atmosphere is warm. There's talk of caring and of love. After being recognized by the leader, a teen-ager gets up and talks honestly about himself—his past, how he feels at the moment, where

What Parents Can Do

PARENTS MAY HOLD within their grasp the ultimate solution to the problem of teen-age drug addiction.

That's the view of a growing list of authorities who believe the greatest deterrent to teen-age drug abuse lies in the organizing of parents' groups (large and small) to combat drugs. For practical advice on how to organize, write:

- National Institute on Drug Abuse, P.O. Box 2305, Rockville, Md. 20857. Ask for a free copy of *Parents, Peers and Pot*, a paperback that describes how parental/peer pressure can counter adolescent drug use.

- National Federation of Parents for Drug Free Youth, P.O. Box 722, Silver Spring, Md. 20901. For \$2 this group provides a starter kit for organizing anti-drug parents.

- National Parents Resources and Information on Drug Education, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Ga. 30303. A parent-group starter kit and a quarterly newsletter are available for \$10.

Unfortunately, many parents refuse to recognize the fact that their children are drug abusers until the problem almost overwhelms them. But there are basic danger signs. For example, symptoms of chronic marijuana use include: red eyes and wheezing coughs; a marked decline in grades coupled with an uncharacteristic drop in motivation; and a sudden loss of weight accompanied by a shift in sleeping patterns.

Educating your children on the dangers of drug use is an important first step. But if you are to prevent your child from becoming a walking chemical, you may have to do more.

he's going. If he puts on an act or doesn't level with his peers, another kid will stand up and say, "Why don't you cut out the crap and be honest with yourself?" The first speaker may have conned his family, his school counselor, his psychiatrist and even the police, but he can't fool this group. They've been there.

Peer Pressure. All who enter Straight go through five phases in an average of from 10 to 14 months. Phase One is, in the words of the kids, a "humbler." A newcomer is never alone. An "oldcomer" sits with him at all times, even accom-

panying him to the bathroom. He can't wear jewelry, a watch or a belt, and he can't read, write, listen to radio, watch television, go to school, live at home or be alone with his family. He spends nights with the family of his oldcomer, whose mother and father become his foster parents. When a newcomer finally makes Phase Two, he may go home to his own mother and father if they live in the area. They, in turn, become foster parents for a newcomer. By now he is an oldcomer with responsibility for easing a newcomer into the program.

During later phases, privileges

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return: reading, writing, school or work, sports, television. Some of the graduates stay on, becoming counselors, leading rap sessions, helping decide when youngsters are ready for the next phase, and giving anti-drug talks around the country. Says Jim Hartz, the young ex-Marine psychologist who is executive director of the program, "Straight is built on one basic premise: since peer pressure gets kids into drugs, peer pressure is the best way to get them out."

Straight demands almost as great a commitment from parents as from children. The commitment is not primarily monetary. The fee for the entire program, however long it takes, is \$2,100, plus a modest fee for food. But what parents *must* spend is time. "At Straight, you don't just dump your kid at the door and walk away," says Mel Sembler, a local businessman who was one of the prime movers in getting it started. Parents must attend two meetings a week for the first three phases (thereafter, one meeting a week), except for out-of-town parents who are required to attend one weekend session a month. These meetings last several hours. Parents sit in a group, opposite the children. They listen as various youngsters tell about their experiences. This is the only time parents can see their child during Phase One.

Halfway through the meeting, parents break up into small, staff-directed groups and share their experiences with other parents, dis-

cuss drug dependency and its effect on families, and learn how to cope with a youngster when he returns home. The message they get is like the children's: "You are not alone!"

Opening Up. Alison was like most newcomers. The first few days she was confused, withdrawn; while others got up in open meeting and listed what drugs they'd taken and the things they'd done to get them, she said nothing. Usually when a young person sat down after such a revelation, the whole group said, "Love ya, Linda," or "Love ya, Dick." She sensed a wave of support that flowed to the speaker. Again, the message was inescapable: "You are not alone!"

Although there are many moments in rap sessions when kids are critical of each other ("You're not digging deep enough" or "You're not being really honest with us"), there is encouragement too. Once a strapping young man of 19 asked a small newcomer to stand up. Both had horrendous police records of drug dealing, vandalism and violence. The older boy, in Phase Three, said, "I like what I've seen in the last two weeks. You've opened up. You've leveled with us for the first time. You're making progress."

Kids at Straight speak of "getting in touch with their emotions," and they're encouraged not to be afraid to show them. Alison, who'd been suppressing her feelings for years, found herself paying more attention. Mostly she thought about

her mother and father, how she missed them. She longed to tell them how sorry she was, how she loved them, but there was only one way to do this: get out of Phase One.

And so at the next meeting, she took a deep breath, stood up, gave her first name and age, and listed all the drugs she'd taken over the years. She also described the things she'd done to get them. When she sat down, there was a chorus of "Love ya, Alison." There was applause, too, but Alison didn't hear it. She had burst into tears.

Branching Out. Alison's story is rather typical of those who succeed in breaking the drug habit, and the road back wasn't easy. She slid back several times. In Phase Two, she took on responsibility for a newcomer, but one day both became itchy for freedom, and they headed into town. By nightfall, hungry and without money, they went to a health clinic and were taken back to Straight. Alison had to return to Phase One. Months went by as she fought her way up to Phase Three—and then another spell of homesickness caused her to leave. For three days Alison and her parents discussed what to do, and then came to the only decision they felt was right—Alison would sign herself back into Straight and once more begin the long climb up from Phase One. She has since made it through the five phases, and is now a staff trainee.

Of course, not all succeed.

Straight claims an overall success rate of about 50 percent for those who complete the program. Of the remaining 50 percent, some never make it. Others slide back into drugs occasionally, but come back for a refresher course. "We never tried to be the whole answer," says a pediatrician who was once Straight's medical director. "But we think Straight offers one answer to the biggest unanswered part of the drug problem—the teen-ager."

That's why parents from all over the country try to get their children into Straight.* Not long ago, branches were started in Sarasota, Atlanta and Cincinnati, and there are plans to introduce the program in other cities. At St. Petersburg, almost every state is represented in the program—not only children but parents who have been desperate enough to pull up stakes and move to Florida.

Alison's parents had to make great personal sacrifices for her. She was always in their thoughts, no matter where they were or what they were doing. But looking back, they feel it was worth it. "We brought in a walking chemical," said her mother. "Now we have a walking miracle!"

*Parents should know, however, that Straight does not accept youngsters who need detoxification, a procedure they feel requires hospitalization.

To find out more about this organization, write: Straight, Inc., P.O. Box 40974, St. Petersburg, Fla. 33743. Or call: (813) 576-5397.

For information on prices and availability of reprints write: Reprint Editor, Reader's Digest, Pleasantville, N.Y. 10570, or call: 914-769-7000.

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