

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT YEARS LOST TO DRUGS

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Why? Her Indianlike features made the white dress all the more stark. Of voluminous skirt and full bodice, with layers of collars, its starched, wrinkle-free appearance attested to much time and care spent in preparing for this day.

The girl, quiet and a bit on the chubby side, would have drawn hardly a second glance, except . . .

Except for her eyes: They fairly danced. And her voice: As she talked with the three strangers sharing the luncheon table, it echoed the excitement reflected in the eyes.

Her name was Molly, she told them. She was 18 and from Seattle; she had been here five months. The previous six years she had been mostly drunk -- booze and drugs, anything to get a high -- and out.

"Here" was Straight Inc., the drug rehabilitation program in Pine Hills. Here was where she had found the high of her life, and without drugs: No longer did she despise herself to the point of suicide; now she liked herself, and looked to the time when she would make peace with her family.

In her other life, the black hair, now pulled around her head, had been in a Mohawk. Then, she existed in a stupor. She stole, she did anything for a fix. Her goal: a chemical crutch, or suicide. Now she was alive.

At the luncheon are others, their stories equally pathetic, equally cheering: Laura, at 21, nine years a druggie; Richard, at 15, half his life on booze; Travis, 14, who can't remember the 1 1/2 years of his life on drugs. Each had progressed through months of therapy to earn this chance to meet the public; yet each knew that of the 100 at the clinic, 38 would be back in the drug world within a year of release. Not a heartening statistic, yet this is one of the better treatment records.

And the problem grows: Drug clinics, non-profit and for-profit, are a growth industry. We take delight that they help; but must we wait until the Mollies of this world lose one-third of their lives?

How to halt the march must be dealt with another day. Today is to celebrate with Molly and friends, to cherish with them their milestone, to pray the light in their eyes does not dim.

But, why must they waste those years?

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