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HEADLINE: U. Central Florida students protest drug treatment center

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BODY:

Mel and Betty **Sembler** founded a drug treatment program called **STRAIGHT** in the 1970s. When the **Semblers** asked President Jimmy Carter to endorse it, he refused. Carter said, "The treatment shouldn't be worse than the drug."

On July 12, more than 20 years later, a group of former patients, parents and activists, including six University of Central Florida students, protested outside the Orlando, Fla., office of the drug-treatment program Substance Abuse Family Education to warn parents about the abuse they suffered as teen-age patients.

They cautioned parents that their children would suffer the same physical and psychological abuse unless they intervened.

SAFE succeeded the **STRAIGHT** program, which the government shut down in 1992. **STRAIGHT** re-emerged under the new name SAFE, using the same abuse tactics in its facilities throughout the nation.

Nine former patients held signs and protested for more than three hours. Many carried signs that read, "Treatment does not have to be abuse." Other patients wore shirts that read, "I was a POW in the War on Drugs."

One protester posed a question that cut to the heart of the problem, "Ask yourself why can you not talk to your children alone?"

Former patients claim that SAFE used, and may still use, mind-control techniques to make patients believe that they are worthless and will die unless they remain in the program.

Patients accuse SAFE facilities of creating a cult-like environment that involved both parents and children, which allowed abuse to occur and go unreported.

■ Henschel, a former SAFE patient, has filed a federal lawsuit accusing SAFE Orlando of negligence and false imprisonment, among other charges. The lawsuit, which is still pending, asserts that SAFE over-medicated, brainwashed and abused the children whom it had promised to help become free and independent.

■ Henschel's mother, ■ participated in the protest. She removed her son from the supervision of SAFE Orlando after four months. She had no proof of any wrongdoing at the time, as children in these programs could not, and still cannot, talk to their parents without supervision.

However, she suspected something was wrong, a premonition that she soon verified.

■ Henschel, who was 13 when he entered the program, spent weeks in solitary confinement during his four months of treatment. Now 16, he claims to have temporarily gone insane from a combination of solitary confinement and over-medication. SAFE counselors prescribed him excessive doses of Adderall, he said.

"The normal adult dosage is about five milligrams a day, two times a day," Henschel said. "They started me off at 15 milligrams a day, twice a day. They got me up to 30 milligrams a day, twice a day. I was put in a 28-day facility to wean me off the Adderall."

He said: "They put me in a concrete room about 8 feet by 4 feet --concrete walls, one little light -- because I misbehaved. It was freezing in there, they put me in there for about 12 hours a day. Sometimes I would be denied my food privileges."

Carrie, 33, struggled to maintain her self-esteem after finishing the program at a **STRAIGHT** treatment center in Cincinnati.

"I spent a good portion of my life thinking I was going to die when I was 23," she said. "I didn't have a drug problem, I just felt worthless."

Members of NORML, like Mike Tiner, protested to lend victims support. NORML is a marijuana-advocacy group at UCF.

He said: "I went out there because of the stories of abuse that I had heard and read on the Internet. I wanted to meet some of these survivors, meet them face-to-face and hear their stories."

Chris Tyler, a businessman and former **STRAIGHT** patient, said he did not suffer abuse like several of the former patients, but his anger was just as strong.

He said: "I was never physically hit or physically restrained. I played the game. They made you get rid of anything that had to do with your identity."

He added: "They teach you how to set goals, and be focused be driven and succeed. Those principles were good, but the way they did it was just bad."

Tyler said he did not think about **STRAIGHT** for 20 years after he graduated from the program. However, after receiving a phone call from an old friend who informed him of the widespread abuse allegations in **STRAIGHT** treatment centers, particularly in Florida, Tyler and other patients formed a

nonprofit organization, Survivors And Friends for the Ethical Treatment of Youth Network, or SAFETY-Net.

The organization's goal is to protest facilities where abuse occurs and change laws to make it more difficult for programs like SAFE to operate.

"My anger comes from that these people need help, and this was done to them," Tyler said. "I am in a position now to affect change. That's why I'm here. We have all these people scattered all across the country, and we're slowly coming together. We're trying to do something good to prevent what's happening to people now."

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