

ARCADIA

Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Telephone 494-5525

SECTION-B

Sun., Jan. 4, 1981

DESOTO
REPORT

P B1

Former Drug Abusers Share The Holidays At Straight-South, Inc.

Straight: Hurt Into Help

Editor's Note: In a three-part series starting today, Herald-Tribune education reporter Kathy Tyrity takes an inside look at drug abuse by teen-agers in Sarasota County. She tells — often through the words of the youngsters themselves — what caused them to try drugs, usually marijuana first and then other, more damaging drugs, how the county's new **Straight** and other anti-drug programs help them fight the habit, and explains what parents can do to combat this insidious force in today's society.

By KATHY TYRITY
Herald-Tribune Reporter

The lofty lights in the cool warehouse shone softly on the teen-ager's silk-like hair as he stood nervously among the others to give his speech.

"This is very hard for me," he began in a husky voice.

Words, spoken hesitantly, introduced him as Scott, 17, (not his real name) to the hundreds of parents and friends seated opposite the young teens.

He looked up at the audience, and as he sucked a quick breath, a sob choked him, and he looked down to the floor.

"We love you, Scott," said 100 of his peers.

Scott flinched with tears, and he wiped his cheeks on his flannel sleeves.

HE STOOD STURDILY AND clasped his hands behind him. Except for the agony on his face and his tear-filled eyes, he looked like a yearbook football hero — the picture of a perfect son.

"I had a great future," he told the audience. "I was told I might even have professional ability in football and baseball...

"But I ruined all that," he sobbed. "Two years ago..." his speech slid into tears.

He was trying to explain how his life had changed from one of a hopeful athlete to one affected only by the thought of where he would get his next "high."

It was a story that hurt more than embarrassed him — because of the irretrievable years. But, he told it to the finish, disregarding the wash of tears.

"IT WASN'T MY parents' fault," he insisted. "They tried to do everything they could for me, all my life..."

"They gave me nice clothes, records, a car. Everything — to make me happy."

As his strained voice stopped short on that thought, it was clear that happiness was not a recent feeling for him. And the audience, feeling his sobs, no longer held back their tears.



It was Scott's third day in the program, and like all newcomers to Straight he would have to make that speech four times at an open meeting.

Not all the youths were as willing to talk so freely or admit they had shame and guilt; they would be "first phasers" at Straight for some time.

SOME OF THE YOUTHS described much larger guilts and a fear that they were killing themselves with an overpowering desire for drugs.

"I knew I would be dead in another six months if I just went on that way," said one 16-year-old.

Irrational, uncaring victims of a high they thought would quell their insecurities and lead them to acceptance, is how they described themselves.

Instead of feeling the tensions and hurts of a million confrontations normal to growing up, they saw their major need as the "happy" security of a temporary high. That would get them by a drink of alcohol before school, some pot to smoke and a few pills to keep that easy feeling going.

Those were their words.

ALL THE WHILE, their teen-age feelings of insecurity, anxiety, disappointment and sorrow kept still and curdled into hate, depressing them when they were **straight**.

One girl told of how she drank alcohol night after night before coming home to arguments and fights with her mother. After an hour or so of sleep one night, she got up and walked into the kitchen, not knowing why she wanted to get a knife and kill her mother.

"I just thought it would be better if she weren't there," said the pretty teen-ager.

(Please Turn To Page 2-B)

Straight

(Continued From Page 1-B)

Somewhere along the line they had missed the approvals they needed to center themselves on their positive qualities and to base their goals on the talents within themselves.

Many of the Straight students (later interviewed) said they had "externalized" their needs for approval.

THEY ADMIRERD THE rock singers, the attention getters in school and their classmates who seemed to have the things they, themselves, wanted — acceptance and popularity. All that instead of looking inside themselves and being the lone approver of the things they saw.

"Drugs was just the thing to do, to be accepted," said one youth, who had admired the rock singers as an aspiring musician.

Either in order to gain "acceptance" in a group they admired, or simply to mask their fears while trying to do so, many of the youths had turned to drugs — mostly, pot and alcohol.

Some were influenced by older people in school or above school age or by their peers who just wanted to see "what the feeling (of alcohol or pot) was like."

The drugs helped them to "not care" about their insecurities during a period when those feelings seemed a little tough to bear. But, unfortunately, for many, they also stopped caring about most of the other things in their lives.

AS TIME WENT ON and their personal problems worsened, they failed to make contact with what the original source of those problems might have been.

And the sad conclusion: They simply did not care.

If the young persons' stories were sad, some of their parents' were even sadder.

Seeing, through the interactions brought about by **Straight**, the roots of their children's problems, many parents stood (as they are required to do) to make their own confessions.

Those confessions included: A lack of time spent with their children, both parents working when one would do, and mothers deliberately working overtime to avoid having to face their unhappy families. Those stories, too, included some tears.

DEVASTATED FATHERS WHO knew nothing of their

children's habits couldn't speak of the heartbreaking moment they discovered the secret.

One boy said he had used drugs but had all the while also held down a full-time job for a year and a half. He said he didn't feel he had contributed to a poor homelife. The counselors asked him to sit down until he could come up with a better explanation.

However, his mother spoke with quiet emotion when she stood later to say she was sorry for her part in the problem and wanted to learn how to make it up.

ALTHOUGH THE YOUTH, a "newcomer," responded little during the open meeting, a few days later while the group was making Christmas presents for each other (after drawing names for the exchange), he came forward to ask approval of his classmates for a beautiful handmade basket he had made for one of the students.

"He's new," said one of the older students. "It will take him a while to relate."

Certainly, the work of the parents and adult counselors deserves a great deal of credit; however, it's the work of "kids helping kids" that makes the program succeed.

WHEN 60 PERCENT of the young people leave Straight "straight," it is only after hours and months of one-on-one support from their peers who have made it through **Straight**.

As one "oldcomer," who is nearing the end of his stay with Straight, put it, "I don't think anyone here would have listened to the adults; they just don't think that way when they come here."

"But they'll talk to us and all we want to do is help them — to teach them how to help and not to hurt."

Only the teens can successfully tell the story of Straight and so here it is.

(Next — The young people)

Ahead of our time since 1887

