

**INSIDE**

Sarasota city commissioners unanimously voted to assist in the funding of a new White Sox clubhouse for Payne Park. See page 2B.

# Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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**LOCAL  
REPORT**

p. 1B

## Going Straight: 'We're Gonna Make It'

This is the last of a series detailing drug abuse by young persons in Sarasota County and the new antidrug programs that help them fight their way back to a stable life.

By **KATHY TYRITY**  
Herald-Tribune Reporter

Seventeen-year-old Tony [redacted] will face one of the most difficult challenges of his life during the new year when he returns to school as a reformed drug user.

It will be difficult because he knows the prevalent drug culture of the high school set will be there to greet him, and it will compare to another difficult challenge he faced last year at this time when he tried, and failed, to accomplish his goal.

"I'm gonna make it," declares the soft-eyed smiling youth.

"We are definitely going to make it," confirms his friend Shaun [redacted] soon to be 17 also.

It is Shaun's first and only time in Straight, and after a year this month, he will be going back to the world of confused and mixed-up teen-agers — minus the added confusion of marijuana and other drugs he used as a crutch.

Shaun, who has spoken up on talk shows and in several newspaper stories on Straight, has only the best praise for the program.

He looks up to the former drug users who helped him get

straight, and as one of those helpers now, he wants to give his best back to people like Tony who need him.

Tony, whose background included more serious problems due to drugs, is grateful for Shaun and the chance to look ahead once again to a new year that may turn his life around.

He tells the story of how he began to use drugs without blaming his parents or anyone but himself.

"I was riding my bike home from school and someone hit me in the head with a rock. I looked and it was the older guy, about 18, with his girlfriend.

"I guess I had said something to his girlfriend; anyway, we started talking and got it cleared up. Later he invited me over to his house and we had some pot.

"I kept going over there when I didn't have anything to do," was Tony's story.

It, of course, got worse when Tony found he enjoyed the drugs and sought them out with the new friends he was finding in high school.

The second to the youngest of four, Tony also recalled that his parents were separating and "they were fighting all the time — from the time I was in junior high."

Tony's problems led all the way up to the point where he was "shooting up" heroin for three months and was ar-



rested 21 times. The charges — anything from breaking and entering to aggravated battery.

Of his homelife when he was on drugs Tony recalled, "Mom never knew what was going on; she never wanted to believe it. Dad would come to bail me out whenever I was arrested, but he never wanted to believe I did drugs."

He somehow drifted apart from the family and tried to solve his problems his own way, until it got him so confused with drugs he really became angry, stole and got into fights.

(Please Turn To Page 3-B)

# Reformed Drug Users: 'We Are Going To Make It'

(Continued From Page 1-B)  
In one such fight at a rowdy party, he wound up with a stab wound "and my friends just threw me out on the porch and told me to wait there until after the party was over."  
Still, he didn't know they weren't his "friends."  
Even Shaun was one of the gang then, "and we did drugs together," they explained with some remorse.

Finally, after the police had made it clear Tony needed help for a drug problem, his father, who owns a small business in Sarasota, took him to Straight in St. Petersburg, where the program originated.

In 3 1/2 months, he had advanced to the third "phase" of the program (First phases go home with the oldsmokers, second phases can go home to their parents and third phases can go back to school and get a job. Fourth phases get "days off" and fifth phases "give back" to the program.)

He enrolled in classes at a St. Petersburg high school, joined ROTC and the drill team, and seemed to be doing well. That was last March.

But in a matter of weeks his new friends convinced him he didn't need Straight any longer and could go it alone; maybe even smoke a few joints.

"So I skipped (left the program) and went to work in a

"I'll be in third phase after the New Year. That means I'll be starting classes at Riverview," he said with the assurance of himself and his friend that he would not be again turning to drugs.

"What right do I have to screw myself up? I'm worth more than that," he declared. "But I'll always be learning; I'll be 'getting straight' the rest of my life."

Shaun will be leaving the program's daily routine as a fifth phaser, and he is more than a little apprehensive. But he knows what he'll need to have with him when he goes.

"I'll have to have a lot of security inside. I've needed a lot of love because I had a lot of hate inside," said the de-voiced, likeable boy.

But he thinks that, having learned how to help people, that will bring him the satisfaction he'll need to get by.

The confidence given to him in return will fill much of his need for love.

"When someone is depending on you, you've got to be there; this is kids helping kids and that's how it works."

He recalls why he thought he needed the crutch of pot and alcohol.

Of course, as a guitar player he looked up to Mick Jagger and "The Stones," who are well regarded in the greater 'rock

with his idea of being a leader and apply for Officers Candidate School after graduation next winter. He wants to be a marine, "because it's clean and I think it would be a good way of life."

Shaun would like to follow his father (with Anderson Ford) in business and maybe play guitar semi-professionally.

In any event the two of them will be looking ahead, feeling fortunate they escaped the much larger group of their friends who went to detention centers or worse.

When they look back, they feel sad for the teen-agers still caught up in their former lifestyle and hope those young persons can be reached by stories such as this.

"Half of us would be dead if we just kept going," the energetic, bright-eyed Shaun said, with only a brief look over his shoulder for the kids who wouldn't come along.

The story of Michele, 17, is similar, and she says girls get involved with drugs "for about the same reasons" boys do.

She grew up in Venice, of affluent although divorced parents. And her brother went through Straight as well as a stepsister (now on the staff) and two stepbrothers.

"I took my first drink at 13," she begins. "It was wine with

By 10th grade, she started skipping school a day or so a week "to go to the mall with my friends" and sometimes to be with a boyfriend. Her grades started falling as she continued her struggle to overcome insecurities.

"I started to see the prettier girls in high school. I grew my hair long and 'foxed it back' like they did. I wore the tight jeans and, believe me, I felt very insecure in those tight low neck tops but I wore them anyway. I just took a drink and went on, that's the only thing that got me through the day."

Her mother and stepfather decided she was misbehaving to the point where she needed help; she convinced them all she needed was a change and ought to be allowed to move to the East Coast to live with her father and stepmother.

"That being the final decision to make her happy, she bid goodbye to her friends and boyfriend at a party, overdosed on booze and wound up in critical condition in a hospital. "I didn't want to leave my boyfriend," she explained.

"After a while it's like you don't care how much you drink," she added, and her friends didn't care either. "They would just drop me off and wouldn't be there to take care of me."

The first two months went smooth in Fort Lauderdale

Months passed, and the inevitable happened again; he dropped her. "I wanted to move away; that's when I started drinking in the mornings. I only went to school about one day a week."

"I was trying to find anyone for friends then," she recalled her desperation. Christmas was approaching and she worked at a dress store. She started cashing the business' checks and pocketing the money and taking more and more (money and alcohol) from home.

Not only that, but she "took someone's credit card" and forged signatures to buy her "friends" things for Christmas. "Inside, I felt scared to death," but she felt the overwhelming need to get money for herself and her friends' habits. Of course the store found the missing funds and she was implicated.

"I wasn't worried about going to jail or anything like that; my father got me off by telling the cops he'd pay for it. I was just worried about how long I would be grounded and stuff like that."

"The things that were happening to me I simply did not care. I spent most of my time in my room with my stereo, and as long as I had that and my car and makeup I was okay. I even got my little brother to smoke with me because I would

do anything to get somebody to be with me."

Finally, her father took her for a long ride "and we were going to Straight, I knew it, even though they said we were going to Busch Gardens. I felt so guilty and sad." But maybe that's what she wanted all along, some honest to goodness help.

It's been nine months and Michele is back in school at the West Florida Christian School. She got "straight" all right and sees with a clear mind exactly how she went wrong.

"I took a while for me to open up. (It looks like after that the rest is easy.) I was on my first phase for two months (that's until you open up and "relate")."

"I still came to meetings with my long hair foxed back and tried to get the guys to notice me." But she learned that the way to get accepted at Straight is by being a friend, relating and being straight with the kids. They won't have it any other way.

Michele also learned that it was fun "to be like a kid again" with the girls in the program and somehow went back to that earlier time when she first got insecure about her looks and about popularity and boys.

"We are really strong friends," she relates. "And we


don't have to fox our hair back. If we want to be kids and goof around together we do it. And my goal is not to be popular. It's just to be happy now."

"You know I think it all started (the drugs) when I started to look at other people I wanted to be like; I started not liking myself because there were other prettier girls, and I

started wanting to be like someone else.

"I stopped seeing what the real happiness is."

She added her parents are now dear to her: "You wouldn't believe, it's just like when I was 10 again. You know how you used to come home all excited and talk about how your day was..." she literally sparkled.




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But in a matter of weeks his new friends convinced him he didn't need Straight any longer and could go it alone; maybe even smoke a few joints.

"So I skipped (left the program) and went to work in a dog food store, from about April to August."

He got back heavy into drugs and left his parents again, feeling somewhat guilty all the while but helpless against the culture that seemed to be so willing to take him in.

Another adult friend gave him a place to stay, and his parents had trouble finding him until August.

They got him back into Straight, and in November the members and staff opened a new branch — its first — in Sarasota.

Eighty or so of the students (ages 12-18 with some up to 22) were from the Sarasota area and another 20 were quick to sign up.

So Tony came back to Sarasota and was glad to do so.

He started listening carefully to Shaun and the two of them worked together to make each other stronger.

When the newer teens he knew as "druggies," started

He recalls why he thought he needed the crutch of pot and alcohol.

Of course, as a guitar player he looked up to Mick Jagger and "The Stones," who are well regarded in the greater 'rock' world but who play songs relating to the drug experience.

Then, too, an experiment with a couple of friends to see what it was like gave him a feeling he could overcome insecurities.

"I didn't feel good out there; it was too hard," he said of the early youth challenges he had only begun to face. Then when he got further into drugs, "I wanted to be in another world all the time."

"I was lonely, depressed and angry. I never looked at reality. It was too hard."

He got arrested "two or three times" for various thefts. (Nearly all the kids said they stole from their parents, stores and even private homes to get drug money.)

And his parents brought him to Straight.

Most of the kids' stories were similar. Some were older, some younger.

For Tony and Shaun, the fact of their friendship has meant as much as the experience of Straight. "A friend is someone I

parents. And her brother went through Straight as well as a stepsister (now on the staff) and two stepbrothers.

"I took my first drink at 13," she begins. "It was wine with the family."

Then in junior high she started experimenting with pot and alcohol "with my girlfriends, just to see what it was like."

The reasons? "Oh, a lot of things. I would feel more secure. It was like a deadener for you; you wouldn't have to feel insecure."

By ninth grade she was used to sneaking out and drinking and smoking pot. "I'd go out drinking with my boyfriends because I thought that was the thing to do."

"Whenever we went out it was to drink or to go to a party and drink; I didn't think there was much more than that, so I did it. And that's how I became an alcoholic," said the attractive teen-ager.

"I didn't ever want to go to a basketball game or anywhere by myself, so I would drink and then go. I did it around the people I felt most insecure with."

drink," she added, and her friends didn't care either. "They would just drop me off and wouldn't be there to take care of me."

The first two months went smooth in Fort Lauderdale "because I didn't know anyone." But she soon looked again to the more popular girls, wanting to be like them and accepted.

"I wanted them to like me. I wanted to be popular and I knew I would have to be in with those kinds of people to get there."

Her parents gave her a car. "Six months later I wanted a better one." They gave her all the newest fashions she begged for "and wasn't happy with three days later."

And she started using her money to buy her friends things. She continued to drink and had to steal from the family liquor cabinet.

Then, the inevitable happened. She got a boyfriend from the popular set. All was indeed well and they parted, drank and drank. "I didn't care about my friends. I just thought if I lost him there would be nothing else."

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to Shaun and the two of them worked together to make each other stronger.

When the newer teens he knew as "druggies," started coming in, he got a better idea of the kind of person he wanted to be.

"Deep inside myself I knew I wanted to get straight and be somebody," said Tony.

"I want to be a leader; that's something I've never been before although I've always known I had the potential." He talked smoothly and without hesitation.

"For my New Year's resolution, I want to be happy doing what I'm doing and to give back what I've gained." He doesn't expect to lose his footing ever again.

similar. Some were older, some younger.

For Tony and Shaun, the fact of their friendship has meant as much as the experience of Straight. "A friend is someone I can trust and who knows all of me, not just a part," said Shaun of his redefined meaning of friendship.

And Tony said, "It's someone who can look at the person I was and accept me for the person I am now."

Shaun added, "It's someone who would give his life to me just to help me out. If I only let a person know half of me, he can't really be a friend. Those friends I thought I had weren't really friends; they didn't know me, and I didn't know them."

Tony wants to carry through

by myself, so I would drink and then go. I did it around the people I felt most insecure with."

and drank. "I didn't care about my friends; I just thought if I lost him there would be nothing else."

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