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Section B

First Complaint From Sarasota Ex-Client

Mother Files Suit Against Straight Program

By MARK ZALOUDEK
Herald-Tribune Reporter

A suit filed for a 14-year-old boy charges he was held against his will and physically and mentally abused for six months in a former Sarasota drug rehabilitation program.

The plaintiff, Benson ██████ seeks \$1.1 million in damages against Straight Inc., which temporarily suspended its operations on Cattlemen Road in July after three years. Although the drug rehabilitation program has been the subject of similar lawsuits elsewhere, ██████ is the first ex-client of the Sarasota branch to file suit.

Sarasota attorney Larry Byrd alleges ██████ "was beaten, hung by his underpants to a bedpost, disrobed in front of female juveniles, picked up and carried about by his hair, mentally and physically tortured" and deprived of proper food,

bathroom facilities, medical attention, psychological counseling and schooling beginning in January 1981."

As a result, Byrd contends that ██████ suffers long-term emotional trauma and possible permanent internal injuries.

He said the boy was sent to Straight when he was 12 for stealing a moped. He said he plans to follow up Tuesday's lawsuit with one next week for ██████ 17-year-old brother, Lawrence, who was also enrolled in the program in 1981. Since both plaintiffs are minors, their suits must be filed by an adult, in this case their mother, Marcia.

Straight Inc. Executive Director Bill Oliver declined to comment when he learned of the suit from a reporter. "Until I see it, I have a tough time responding to it," Oliver said. He added that he believes Straight will be cleared of the charges "when the facts are out."

Sarasota's Straight has graduated 165 youths since it opened Nov. 2, 1980. Officials said all 47 local teens enrolled when the

program temporarily suspended operations July 20, amid a backlash by parents and criticism by State Attorney James A. Gardner, voluntarily transferred to Straight's headquarters branch in St. Petersburg.

Straight also operates satellite programs in Cincinnati, Atlanta and Alexandria, Va.

Straight was regarded by some experts as one of the most successful treatment programs in the nation, a distinction that helped it catch the attention of First Lady Nancy Reagan, who visited the St. Petersburg facility last year.

But recently Straight has had its share of problems, too.

A federal jury awarded a former client \$220,000 this summer after he proved the St. Petersburg and Alexandria facilities held him against his will.

And in August, two Central Florida residents who claimed they were held against their will by Straight's St. Petersburg facility received out-of-court financial settlements.