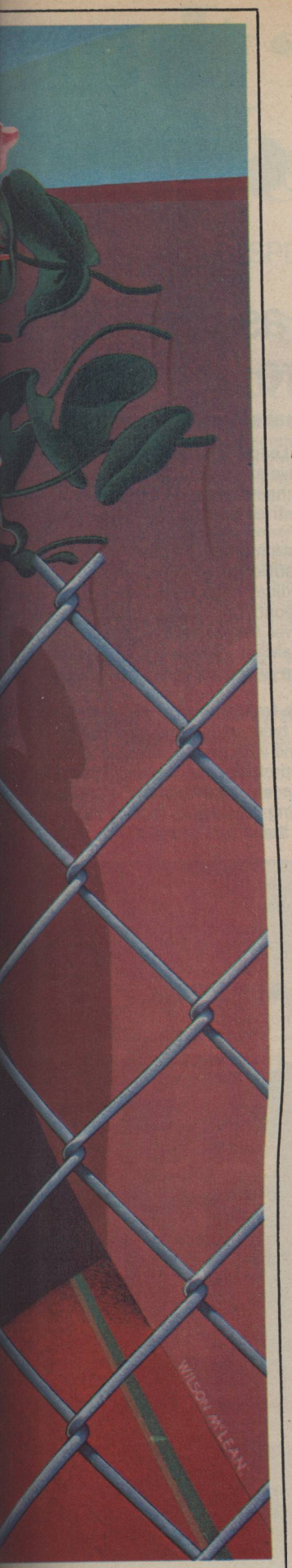

Today The Seed, tomorrow the world

By Eleanor Randolph

Former comic Art Barker says he will turn your drug-crazed kid into a dream teen. Others say his program, The Seed, practices the brainwashing of the future

For $250 Art Barker will turn your brooding, dope-smoking, average rotten teenager into a right-thinking American kid. Send him a 15-year-old Janis Joplin, the way a retired Army colonel did last October, and Barker, who operates out of Florida, will return a Karen Carpenter by mid-November. Claude Greene's boy was surly to the neighbors in St. Petersburg. He had long hair and a perpetually longer face. As one friend of the family put it, "Only drugs could make a kid that rude." Today, the elder Greene, a former city councilman, makes the tours of service club luncheons to beg support for Barker. His son is a dream teen. He smiles at the

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man across the street. He takes out the garbage. He obeys his teachers and even his parents.

"The man is a savior," Greene once told the Optimist Club in St. Petersburg. "He saves kids' lives."

The Army colonel, a more practical man, is only a little less adoring: "No matter what you say about Barker, he changed my kid into somebody we can love. And who loves us, of course."

Arthur Robert Barker is a short, quick-tempered man who until four years ago made a scant living as a stand-in comic in Miami Beach. An ex-alcoholic who now lives in a $150,000 house and wears gold cuff links, Barker founded what started in 1970 as a drug prevention program called "The Seed." Since then The Seed has spread to three Florida cities where more than 5,000 teenagers have been sent for abusing drugs, sex, liquor and especially their parents. In the language of psychologists, most of whom are not allowed in any of The Seed centers unless they are ardent Seed supporters, Barker uses his own crude form of behavior modification. Opponents of The Seed put it more directly. They call it brainwashing.

Art Barker, who wears his bangs cut into a "V" that dips almost between his eyebrows, runs his controversial empire from behind a massive, curved desk in his Seed headquarters outside of Fort Lauderdale. He smokes constantly, sipping coffee between drags, and talks in a rapid New York accent about the evils of drugs.

The office is dark. His windows have been walled against gunshots he claims come from his enemies who are out there in two varieties beyond the 10-foot-high chain link fence, the guards and the high-intensity anti-crime lamps that surround his sprawling cement stronghold.

"They are all either druggies or they are fools," he once said of his critics. Later, he softened the view to include the growing percentage of Americans who suffer from mental illness. But Barker saves his special venom for psychiatrists like Dr. Raymond Killinger, who has been openly critical of his program.

Killinger, who works in Fort Lauderdale and has never been allowed into The Seed, says that he and his colleagues have treated "an increasing number" of young people who emerge from The Seed only to enter a psychiatric hospital. Some have nervous breakdowns. A few, says Killinger, have tried to commit suicide because of Barker's program.

"The man is a liar and a fool," Barker says of Killinger. He claims that "the psychiatrists can't do a damn thing with kids on drugs." Barker got his own degree in psychology from a Fort Lauderdale diploma mill that was closed in 1972 by the state.

So far the state has been pretty nice to Barker. Florida's Lieutenant Governor Tom Adams has endorsed him. U.S. Rep. Claude Pepper, a Democrat from Florida, chaired a committee that called The Seed "one of the most imaginative, innovative and dynamic programs designed to eliminate drug abuse by young people." Indeed, Barker's biggest fight with the state concerned his success rate. Barker claims that 90 percent of the youngsters who go into The Seed come out "cured." The state Office of Drug Abuse says it's closer to 41 percent, which is still far ahead of most drug programs. By Barker's recently published standards, successful Seedlings, as they are called, "become respected members of their community, discover that they can love themselves, love others, love family, love God and love their Country."

Ex-Seedling Patrick, an 18-year-old from St. Petersburg, loves himself, others, family, God and Country. But he is still a Seed failure. After two and a half months in The Seed, he does not love Art Barker.

Pat would not allow the use of his real name in telling his story about The Seed. His father works in Pinellas County, which includes St. Petersburg, and is afraid he would lose his job. There are many powerful people in southwest Florida who support Art Barker and The Seed. One of them, the father's employer, has a Seedling for a son.

As Pat told his story to St. Petersburg *Times* reporter Margaret Leonard, his term at The Seed began after neighbors told his parents he was on drugs. They visited Pat's parents one day and explained that their children, all Seedlings, had confessed to doing dope with Pat. As proof, they reminded his mother that Pat had posters on his bedroom wall. Definitely a "druggie" symbol, they said. Also his room was too dark. Light hurts druggie eyes.

Seedling parents have also explained to other parents that druggies listen to Alice Cooper and don't want to mow the lawn. If your kid owns a van you've got trouble, hundreds of unsuspecting parents have been told in Florida.

"People involved with The Seed literally convinced us he was on drugs," Pat's father says now. "We had no proof at all. The only thing we had was pure growing-up actions. He was kind of stinky."

Unlike many Seedlings, Pat went quietly to the center in Fort Lauderdale. Some youngsters have said they were enrolled by being locked in cars or surprised on their way home from school. One parent boasted to Eugene Patterson, editor of the St. Petersburg *Times*, that she woke her daughter up at 5 a.m. one morning after finding what appeared to be a marijuana cigarette in the family car. The girl screamed and clawed at the car windows for the four-hour drive to Fort Lauderdale. Undaunted, the mother enrolled the child anyway.

Juvenile judges in Pinellas County routinely sentence youngsters to The Seed. Barker and his staff often demand that parents sign a petition giving The Seed custody of their children. The petition says the youngster is incorrigible. It also makes it illegal for him to run away if he is under 17 years of age.

One judge, Circuit Judge Richard Miller, said he prefers juveniles to be absent from the courtroom while they are being committed. Usually, the youngster is not allowed to have a lawyer during this hearing, and he will probably find it even harder to get a lawyer once he is in the program. Asked recently whether a Seedling is allowed to telephone his attorney, Barker answered: "Why would they need a lawyer? They don't need a lawyer."

For Pat, his parents simply drove him to the Fort Lauderdale fortress where he was greeted by a young supervisor named Danny. Like the other young people who administer Barker's psychic medicine, Danny is a Seed graduate.

Nobody knows how to cure a druggie but a druggie, Danny told Pat and his parents that night to explain why Seedling graduates are in charge. And nobody knows how to recognize a druggie like an ex-druggie either, he added. Danny then stared into Pat's eyes, shook his hand and proclaimed he had just shaken the hand of a druggie.

As Pat tells it, his soft voice indignant but amazingly devoid of bitterness, he answered firmly that he did not take drugs. Danny smiled, then led him away from his parents to a long, open room where about 250 Seedlings sat on one side and about the same number of parents and visitors sat on the other.

Pat's first hours in The Seed were at one of the two public sessions a week where Seedlings confess their drug habits.

"I did everything from pot to heroin, uppers and downers, THC, STP and LSD. I was selfish. I hated my teachers," said a smiling girl, baring fresh, pink arms that had never seen a needle outside the local doctor's office.

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Her parents sat across the room on hard-back chairs—cushioned against the long evening with football pillows brought from home. Her father clutched his wife's hand, unwittingly pressing a large teardrop diamond into her fleshy little finger. Her mother cried silently.

"Luvya, Mom and Dad," came the childlike voice of their daughter as her confession ended. "Luvya, everybody."

"Luvya, Gidget," the crowd roared as she sat down and handed the microphone to another Seedling who had almost exactly the same list of sins to confess.

When the mass catharsis ended and the guests were firmly out of earshot, Pat said that Danny took the microphone and introduced him.

"This is [Pat] from St. Petersburg, and he says he's never done drugs," Pat remembers.

The huge room, decorated at one end with a large American flag, echoed with smug laughter.

"We don't really believe him when he says he's not on drugs, do we?"

"Nooo," came the chorus.

"Let's tell him we love him anyway."

"Luvya, Pat," more than 200 voices obeyed.

As he sat in the front row that night, Pat suddenly realized what The Seed meant, and he didn't like it. The idea was probably a good one, he figured—peer pressure gets kids on drugs, then peer pressure can get them off drugs. But these Seed kids sitting behind him, smiling blankly at each other, looked like zombies.

The next day he found out why.

After being locked and guarded at another Seedling's house all night, Pat woke up the next morning to begin almost six weeks of daily appearances at The Seed—each session running from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

As he sat with about 50 other boys in one corner of the building, a Seed supervisor stood one boy up and then started tearing him down. Ugly, selfish, weak. He had acne or braces or a big Adam's apple. The supervisor and the group concentrated on that secret horror every 16-year-old tries desperately to hide from the girls, the friends and the school photographer.

At the other side of the room, Pat remembers a girl getting the same treatment from her fellow female Seedlings. It took about an hour. In that time, she kept insisting that she had never taken drugs. She was about 12 or 13 years old, Pat estimated, but nothing seemed to work. Too skinny, a whining voice. The girl listened and continued to protest that her past had been drug-free.

Then one of the older girls started talking about sex. "You aren't even old enough to know what to do with it," she said haughtily. The child started to shake.

"You probably couldn't even do it with a Coke bottle," the older girl shrieked, finally reducing her target to tears.

Later, the young girl confessed to using drugs and being selfish. When the confessions came, Seedlings would hold her hand, tell her she was loved by The Seed and ask her to rat on teachers, policemen or friends her age (potential Seedlings) who had taken drugs with her.

For Pat, even after two and a half months at The Seed, the pressure didn't work. They took away his weekly visits to church ("The only time you pray to God is when you're in trouble, and he never seems to answer you, so The Seed is your God," he says he was told). They took away his money. They timed his visits to the bathroom. They locked him in his room at night and watched him apprehensively during the day.

"Luvya, Mom and Dad," came the childlike voice of their daughter as her confession ended. "Luvya, Gidget," the crowd roared as she sat down

"While they weren't looking one night, I slipped out the back door and walked about 15 or 20 miles, saying the Lord's Prayer all the way. I didn't have a watch. It was maybe 3 a.m. when I came to this intersection. A cop came by and asked my name, and I said I was going to St. Pete to visit relatives," he recalls.

During the long, inevitable ride from the palm-lined highway to the Fort Lauderdale police station, Pat confessed to the policeman that he was from The Seed. "I started telling him what it was like, and he actually started sympathizing with me."

The sympathy ended when the policeman finally took him to the family that was keeping Pat that night. The adults explained that Pat was "heavy" on drugs. "They said I would be dead from drugs in a matter of weeks if I got out of The Seed," Pat says.

After that, Seed officials sent for his parents in order to begin one of the more extreme treatments for those who are slow to convert. While the entire staff watched, Pat's father obeyed the supervisors' orders. He tried to whip The Seed's credo of love into his teenage son.

A pinched look comes over Pat's face when he talks about the incident. He can remember fighting with his father and suddenly seeing blood on the man's lip. He can still see his mother standing in a crowd of smiling Seed teenagers. She was crying. Pat's father, who even now tells the story over involuntary tears, says that after the public beating he went to the nearest bathroom and vomited.

Later, Pat sneaked out again and spent the night in a bed of damp weeds near a rambling Florida trailer park. When it got light, he stood on the highway and hitchhiked back to St. Petersburg. At home, around noon, he found the front door unlocked and a note on the kitchen table from his mother, asking him to call her at work. When his parents arrived, Pat's father told him angrily that The Seed had called about his escape.

But this time the anger was not directed at Pat. His father said The Seed called, collect, to tell them to notify every police station on his route home to have Pat picked up as a runaway and a vagrant. They told Pat's parents to padlock the doors and refuse to let him in the house. Pat's father recalls that he was told to call the police and have his son arrested for trespassing as soon as he appeared on the front lawn.

"He flatly refused. He wouldn't do that even if he thought I was on heroin," Pat says of his father. "The last thing he wanted was for me to get busted."

Pat said his parents spent that afternoon and many evenings later talking about The Seed and Art Barker. "They know now that I wasn't on drugs. They know it wasn't right for me, although it may be a good idea for the hard-core druggies."

Pat's escape was more than a year ago. Since then he has graduated from high school, turned 18 and joined the U.S. Air Force. His former associates from The Seed are not allowed to speak to him. He is a failure, by their standards, and as a result he is generally considered by some Seedlings either to be on drugs or to have some kind of mental problem.

If Barker is correct in his estimates of The Seed's success, Pat is also in the very slim minority. Most of the youngsters in the program—whether they came in for drug use or other problems—come out the

way Barker wants them to come out.

The American Civil Liberties Union is one organization that is not happy about Barker's army of 5,000 anti-drug addicts. They are looking into the possibility of invasion of privacy—a youngster's private right to grow up in painful fits and starts.

The National Institute of Drug Abuse is also somewhat displeased with Barker. After the institute gave Barker more than $200,000 to run his program last year, they balked at putting another $700,000 into The Seed unless Barker opened his books and his doors to federal inspectors this year. Barker refused and issued a statement claiming that he doesn't need federal money or the "excessive demands, harassment and bureaucracy" that go with it.

But the ACLU and NIDA are also in the minority. Barker mainly gets laurels. For thousands of Florida parents, Art Barker is the man who took their broken-down kids and fixed them. He overhauled psyches and wrung out those painful mid-teen years when children start shouting back. The man who for years yearned to be loved by nightclub audiences finally has a following that thinks he is more than just funny. They think Art Barker is divine.

With that kind of backing, plus awards from such groups as the Freedoms Foundation of Valley Forge, Barker plans within a year or so to spread Seed outposts throughout the South, within a few years to foster Seedlings around the country and in 10 years to locate Seed branches around the world. As one St. Petersburg psychiatrist put it facetiously, after hearing the game plan, "If Barker goes according to schedule, The Seed should be in full command of the world's children sometime in the summer of 1984." ●