

FOCUS - 1 of 12 DOCUMENTS

The Washington Post

December 2, 1982, Thursday, Final Edition

Fairfax Man Charges Firm Brainwashes Drug Users

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SECTION: Metro; B16

LENGTH: 573 words

A suit charging that Straight Inc., a controversial Florida-based drug rehabilitation program for youths, uses brainwashing techniques and holds participants against their will was filed yesterday by a 20-year-old **Fairfax** County man.

The class-action suit alleged "outrageous and unconscionable conduct" by Straight in its five branches, including one in **Fairfax**, and was filed in U.S. District Court in Alexandria by Fred Collins, a former program participant.

Collins, a former Virginia Tech student, charged he was held captive by Straight for 5 1/2 months earlier this year with the knowledge of his parents, who were not named as a party to the suit. They could not be reached for comment yesterday. He also alleged the firm's methods included mental and physical abuse, solitary confinement and "a prolonged diet of water and peanut butter sandwiches."

Ronald Goldfarb, a D.C. lawyer representing Straight, yesterday declined comment on the complaint.

Collins was transferred from Florida to a newly opened Straight branch in **Fairfax** in October and at night was locked in the home of his parents, who cooperated in the program, the complaint contended.

Collins escaped from his parents' home about a month ago by secretly learning the numbered code to an alarm system on his bedroom door and then throwing a table through a kitchen window, the complaint said.

The complaint, which asked \$750,000 in damages for Collins and each of about 4,000 participants in the six-year-old program, is the latest example of sharp criticism leveled at Straight by its detractors.

Others, including parents of some drug-addicted youths, have credited the program with saving the lives of their children.

Straight, a private nonprofit company, operates programs in St. Petersburg and Sarasota, Fla., Atlanta and Cincinnati.

A fifth branch at 5515 Backlick Rd. in **Fairfax** was warmly endorsed three months ago by **Fairfax** supervisors.

In his complaint, Collins said he was involuntarily enrolled in the program during a June trip with his parents to St. Petersburg to visit his 15-year-old brother who was enrolled in the Straight program. Collins alleged that he filled out a drug-use questionnaire as a precondition of seeing his brother.

Although Collins said in his complaint that he had never abused drugs or alcohol, he was told by Straight employees his answers showed he was a "chemically dependent person."

Collins agreed to spend 14 days in the program after he was held for three hours and "falsely advised" that he could not leave, the complaint alleged.

The Straight program involved 12-hour days of "rap sessions" that included physical and verbal abuse, the complaint alleged. Collins subsequently was held from June until his escape, according to the complaint, and had "lost all hope." The complaint contended that ". . . individuals who tried to walk out of the center were knocked down to the floor by Straight employes and were literally sat upon."

The complaint also said that newcomers to the program were not allowed to move without a more senior program participant holding the newcomer's belt loop.

Collins was scheduled to appear yesterday in **Fairfax** General District Court to face a charge of destruction of property in connection with the window-breaking incident at his parents' home.

Collins' attorney, Philip Hirschkop, said the charge was dropped in exchange for a payment of \$75 in damages.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

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