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HEADLINE: Drug Rehab Center Loses Suit; Victim Loses Family Life

DATELINE: BLACKSBURG, Va.

BODY:

Fred Collins III won his freedom and his lawsuit, but in the process he lost his

home.

Last month, Collins, a Virginia Tech sophomore, was awarded \$220,000 in damages from **Straight Inc.** after a federal jury decided that the drug rehabilitation program held him against his will for 133 days.

Collins said however, that after he fled the program his parents, who have become believers in Straight, disowned him. He said his younger brother, George, who is still in the program, won't speak to him.

"I tried to talk with them around Christmas and they didn't want to have anything to do with me," he said of his parents in a recent interview. "They still don't want to have anything to do with me. They think I'm a crazy drug fiend or something."

Straight's techniques and accomplishments have been praised by national anti-drug groups and received wide attention after Nancy Reagan lauded its efforts during a visit to its St. Petersburg, Fla., facility. The program claims to have grown from 300 clients to 800 since 1976 with a budget of \$1.5 million a year.

Collins' parents declined to comment when contacted. However, during the trial in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, the father testified that his son "~~is no longer a~~ part of his family (because) he chose to leave ... It is my earnest hope that someday, when I am assured he is drug-free, I hope that we can reconstruct a family relationship."

Collins said his parents paid about \$6,000 or \$7,000 for their two children to participate in the program.

He said he will study mine engineering at Virginia Tech and continue the life he lived before the incident with Straight. He said he expects that half the jury award will go to pay his lawyers and until he gets the money, he plans to live off loans and possible grants.

Collins, 20, grew up on the outskirts of Alexandria, where his parents lived in a fashionable suburban home. By his account, he and his parents enjoyed a normal relationship.

"I thought we were the typical middle-class family. Two kids, a dog, a beach house," he said.

Like many teen-agers, Collins and his younger brother didn't always agree with their parents. Both admitted during the trial that they smoked marijuana and hashish together.

In January 1982, concerned with George Collins' continuing drug use, his parents enrolled him in Straight.

Six months later, after finishing his freshman year at Virginia Tech, Collins said he traveled to the Straight facility at his parents' request, knowing he would be interrogated and "checked out." He had quit smoking marijuana a year before, but he wanted to see his brother, he said.

The visit began what he now calls a nightmare. During the trial, Collins testified that he was physically and mentally abused during his four months at Straight.

The jury agreed Collins had been held against his will and awarded him \$40,000 to compensate him and \$180,000 to punish Straight. The jurors did not find that he was mentally and physically abused.

William Oliver, Straight's executive director, said Collins' allegations "were grossly exaggerated" and Straight will appeal the verdict.

"The jury vindicated me," said Collins. The jurors "let me know they believed what I said. ... It's going to hurt (Straight). They're going to think twice about going out and kidnapping an adult."

"The only reason I sued was so they would not kidnap me back. That's what I feared most," Collins said.

A half-dozen other young people testified at Collins' trial or have filed suit against the organization. But other participants testified that Straight broke them of their drug dependency and turned their lives around.

Collins said there was no therapy at Straight. "It was really brainwashing. The first thing they try to do is degrade you and take away all sense of personal worth. They take away all of your possessions. They put down all of your friends. They put me down. They would make fun of the way I looked," he said.

Collins said he had to exaggerate his use of drugs to satisfy the group, which constantly applied pressure and would shout down those who refused to make public confessions.

"They didn't care if it was the truth or not. We had to keep on lying until they were satisfied with our stories so we could progress and move on to a higher phase," Collins said.

Collins was transferred when Straight opened a program in Springfield near his northern Virginia home. Once there he said he devised a plan which involved escaping from his own home where he had been placed by the group.

His parents, who had become active in Straight, had alarms on the doors and the windows were bolted, he said. Collins learned the code to the door alarm and escaped by shutting it off. He gathered his books and calculator, called a friend and smashed a table through a window.

"All I wanted to do was go back to school. That's all I wanted to do," he said.

GRAPHIC: Laserphoto RN1
