

Virginia



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Fred Collins, a Virginia Tech student who won a \$220,000 judgment against Straight, a Florida drug treatment program, said he and his family were trying to put the bitterness about the lawsuit behind them.

Family Tries Reuniting After Painful Lawsuit

BLACKSBURG (AP) — In October 1982, Fred Collins III fled a drug rehabilitation program by tossing a table through a locked kitchen window in his own home in a fashionable suburban neighborhood in Fairfax County.

His escape shattered his relationship with his family like the panes of glass in the kitchen window. But this week, Collins returned to that house in an attempt to put the family pieces back together.

"I'm going home for Christmas for the first time in three years," the 22-year-old Virginia Tech student said in a recent interview. "I guess I've really been accepted back as a probationary member of the family."

Collins, an industrial engineering student, attracted nationwide attention by winning \$220,000 in damages in a lawsuit against Straight Inc., a controversial drug program he said held him against his will for more than four months in 1982. Collins said he did not have a drug problem.

Last month, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the award. Straight wants the full court to hear the case, and its lawyer said he is considering an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Collins' legal challenge put him at odds with his parents and brother, who support the program.

Until recently, his parents had disowned him, Collins said, and his

brother, a high school student who has graduated from Straight, refused for months to talk to him.

He said he wasn't welcomed back home for months and he began to feel like a stranger in his own neighborhood. "It's pretty bad going by your own house and your dog barks at you," he said.

The family rift was intensified when his parents cut off financial support, he said. Collins was left struggling to pay his way through college, relying on loans, gifts and part-time jobs.

Another sore point for his family was the intense media attention given to the case after he won the lawsuit in the spring of 1983. He was featured on national TV programs, including "60 Minutes" and "20-20."

But the cold relationship between son and parents began thawing a bit in the past month, since Collins' \$220,000 award was upheld on appeal.

Collins said that shortly after that legal victory, he called his father and asked him if he wanted to try to rebuild a family relationship. The answer was yes.

Collins is skeptical that his relationship with his family can ever be fully repaired.

"Too much has transpired to do that," he said. "It's sad. It's like breaking a nice vase. You can put it back together but it will never be the same."

Straight, based in St. Petersburg, Fla., has won praise nationwide for its results in turning teen-agers and young adults away from drugs. But in court, Collins called the program a "cult" that made his life a nightmare for several months in 1982.

He said he was kept prisoner by the program and claimed Straight subjected teen-agers and young adults to mental and physical abuse.

Since Collins won the lawsuit, Straight has promised to change its procedures to allow those over 18 to leave the program upon request.

Today, Collins said, things are going well, but his readjustment to college life has been a long time in coming.

Collins plans to take next year off from school to go to Richmond to work as a paramedic to earn enough money to continue his education at Tech. He is broke, he said.

Because of the continuing court appeals by Straight, Collins does not expect to receive his \$220,000 award for several months. He estimates he may get \$60,000 after paying his lawyers and his taxes.

And Collins said the money award can't really compensate him.

"I would rather be back to where I was two days before I went into Straight," he said. "Money is no comparison to a family. You can't buy back your parents' love."