

# Straight Inc. Accuser Mends Family Ties



A Wirephoto

Fred Collins: "It will never be the same."

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**BLACKSBURG, Va. (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."

Collins' parents generally have refused to talk to reporters about their relationship with their son or his case against Straight.

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.

Collins went with his parents to Florida to visit his brother George, who was enrolled in the program, in January, 1982. He hadn't used drugs in a year, Collins said, but the Straight staff convinced his parents that he had a drug

problem and needed to enroll in the program.

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

When Straight opened a new rehabilitation center in northern Virginia, Collins was transferred there. It was during a visit to his parents' home that he escaped.

William Oliver, Straight's executive director, has called Collins' charges "grossly exaggerated." The program's supporters acknowledge that the program's participants undergo disciplined and rigorous therapy sessions but deny the charges of physical and mental abuse.

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

Collins acknowledges that Straight probably helped his brother to a degree with his drug problem but said the tactics the group uses are indefensible.

"I don't care if you do heroin, I don't think anyone has the right to imprison you against your will," he said.

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

"I was a maniac when I got out of there (Straight)," said Collins. "I used to wake up screaming every night."

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.