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## Getting Straight: One Family's Sage; Leslie [REDACTED] & the Controversial Antidrug Program

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The look is youthful innocence. No makeup covering the freckles. Neatly cut hair with no trace of tint or dye. Direct blue eyes. No mascara. And the crinkly, open, reassuringly all-American smile so comforting to parents and grandparents.

"The **drugs** I did were pot, alcohol, hash, speed, LSD, rush and trash **drugs**," says 16-year-old Leslie [REDACTED]. "I would skip school every day, get notes and forge teachers' signatures, and I was getting Ds and Fs. I would steal from my mom's purse. They didn't know where the money went."

When her parents questioned her, Leslie, who has two stepbrothers, one 22 and the other her own age, imitates the wide-eyed look of shocked surprise that got her by for months. "Hey, it wasn't me!"

It began as curiosity. The summer before she entered the seventh grade she smoked marijuana at a party, got dizzy on the ride home and "threw up on pot!" says Leslie, with a roll of her eyes. "It was so embarrassing. I had throw-up all over me when I snuck into the house." Her older stepbrother accused her of drinking. "I said, 'I wasn't drinking.'"

Leslie has been **drug**-free for 19 months, and her story of **drugs**, lying, cheating, stealing and, eventually, posing for nude photographs seems unreal today.

Her mother and adoptive father appear the best of middle-class parents -- concerned, loving, enlightened. John [REDACTED] retired from the Navy as chief of legislative affairs and now works for Honeywell. Her mother Sandy is a computer program analyst for the Navy. They have been married six years, the second marriage for each.

But the [REDACTED] were to discover, through a **drug** rehabilitation program, that family problems were a factor in Leslie's involvement with **drugs**, that, as in many cases, **drugs** were as much a symptom as a cause of their child's problems. Despite their apparently supportive family network, the six-year effort to merge two families had left Leslie feeling lonely and lost. She felt isolated within her new family and abandoned by her real father, and unable to talk about it with anyone. Never a good student, she felt further isolated at school, where she thought of herself as a misfit.

The [REDACTED] were also to find out that their pretty daughter inhabited a secret world of networking teen-agers whose cleverness and deception would leave them stunned and sick. They were finally propelled into an intense commitment to cure what they now term a family problem.

Theirs is but one family among thousands that have known the pain and desperation behind the impersonal statistics of America's massive **drug** habit. They are among the countless parents who dealt with **drug** use in part by denial,

pretending they didn't see its symptoms. Now they tell their story, in the hope of helping others.

The [REDACTED] are participants in **Straight Inc.**, one of the nation's largest -- and most controversial -- **drug** rehabilitation programs. Straight demands as much of the parents as it does of the **drug** abusers. The children are generally brought in -- most of them unwillingly -- by parents. Billed as the "family treatment program," Straight has eight chapters in the country -- one of them in Springfield. It is unique in that the parents provide all the housing -- for other people's children as well as their own. The cost for Leslie's treatment was \$ 7,000.

Straight received international publicity when First Lady Nancy Reagan and Princess Diana visited the Virginia facility a year ago, but it remains as vociferously criticized as it is defended.

While many parents such as the [REDACTED] swear by it, others have filed lawsuits against several Straight facilities, including Springfield. They allege Straight maintains a brainwashing, "Lord of the Flies" atmosphere in which youths are mentally and physically abused by other teen-agers in the program. Other parents swear by Straight's principles but say they are misapplied by staff members.

Straight officials deny any charges of mistreatment. "We've treated more than 5,000 in the past six years," said Straight's national director, Mel Riddile. "Occasionally there are going to be things that will cause some to be dissatisfied." Working with their daughter in Straight for 19 months meant the kind of sacrifices the [REDACTED], like most middle-class parents, never experienced. Over the months they housed about 50 other "druggies," gave up most of their social life and all drinking, and abided by rules and programs that at first seemed to Sandy [REDACTED] "real weird."

There were weeks of stormy and tearful sessions, nightmarish revelations, rebellion and reevaluation. It meant the entire family confronting their hurts and anger, acknowledging their denials and guilt.

It has been a roller coaster of progress and setbacks and, finally, real hope for a **drug**-free future.

Doing **Drugs** "I only did speed once. I didn't think it was really a fascinating **drug**. It made me really hyper," says Leslie. "LSD was powerful. I'd heard people talk about how scary it was, but still ... I thought, 'God, I really want to do that.' "

Being cool was vital; the **drug** crowd "looking up to me, saying, 'She does LSD.'" Sometimes it was fun. But I felt paranoid a lot. Like people were watching me. Only once was it bad, like seeing walls melt, but some friends got me out of that trip." She says she took LSD "seven or eight times," and looks shocked, thinking back. "When I think of how some people get really screwed up on it, like thinking they're Superman and jump out of windows and die, God, I just was lucky."

At 14, after a year of doing **drugs**, Leslie met an older couple. Although still in her teens, the woman had a baby. "I just thought that was kind of neat ... sort of the 'in' thing and I'd be cool if I was around her." The man was in his twenties. "He supplied me with alcohol and pot." Their home was a place Leslie felt free to "do anything." That summer she lied constantly to her mother, saying she was going to the pool and then going to the couple's home. Once she spent the night there, telling her mother she was staying at a girlfriend's house. The man got on the phone and posed as the friend's parent.

"Toward the end of my past, I would have sex with a boyfriend," Leslie says. "But that man at the house wanted to and I wouldn't let him. I thought it was really gross, especially with him. A really disgusting mess. He would do things for me, but he just used me." Leslie slowed down and looked away as she spoke of the nude pictures he took of her. It started with her in a bathing suit. "Then it got to the point I would just do it nude." She stops again and swallows. "And that's really embarrassing -- especially having my parents know."

Leslie's "getting honest," in Straight jargon, is considered part of the cure, but it was months before Leslie could open up about her past. She still has trouble with details of the time she was high and taking a shower and the man tried to

force her to have sex. In a panic, she pushed him away, threw on her clothes and bolted out, sobbing. By then she had woven her web of lies; there was no way she could confide in her parents.

"I used to run through my mind this scenario of how I would find that guy and do things to him," says John [REDACTED]. "When we finally found out, the police investigated, but because he didn't give her money and didn't force her to pose and because it was months after, they felt there wasn't legally sufficient cause" for prosecution.

"But it's a horrible feeling as a father, knowing that man violated my child and not having any recourse through the law."

For months now, Leslie's mother has lived with the stories, and still the tears brim. "I remember when she was a baby and I rocked her at night." Leslie, sitting next to her mother at the table, absent-mindedly touches her mother's hair as Sandy [REDACTED] continues. "It is just so sad to hear the things she did in her past. She was really just a child ..."

The Crisis The average age at which Straight youths started **drugs** is 12 1/2. Alcohol is always the first step.

"The biggest problem I see is that the kids are in charge of the family," says Suzanne Hardman, the director of Straight. "One reason people say we're extreme is that we put parents in charge of their kids." Hardman got involved with Straight 10 years ago when her then-teen-age son got in trouble with **drugs**. "And I was a school counselor! Talk about feeling stupid. My kid was really really clever, as they all are."

The [REDACTED] trace their own saga of subterfuge. They had gone to a family therapist and Leslie "walked her way right through it," says her mother. "Druggies have become experts at what you want to hear. They have perfected it because it is their survival. Even though Leslie was doing terribly in school, we would get a 'perfect' progress report; no missed homework, etc. A friend would write Leslie's 'perfect' report one day and she would write her friend's 'perfect' report the next."

Worried about Leslie's grades and lack of motivation, the [REDACTED] went to the school counselor. "She just snowed that counselor. I remember asking if she thought Leslie was doing **drugs** and she replied that, even though Leslie did hang around with a suspect crowd, she didn't think so. That gave me a false sense of security."

There were the usual excuses for coming in late -- car out of gas, some other friends were driven home first, and so forth. When put on restrictions, Leslie would retreat to her room in sullen pique and was soon back out. Monitoring her was almost impossible. For example, a trip to the roller rink, driven by a relative of a friend, sounded innocent enough. The woman used cocaine and gave the girls marijuana.

If they had to do it again, the [REDACTED] would sharply curtail the number of sleep-overs. "The girls had it all worked out. If you called for Leslie, she'd be 'in the shower' or 'already asleep' or something. And she wouldn't even be there," [REDACTED] says. Instead, Leslie was out getting high with friends.

Leslie had become so irritable and hostile that one night her stepfather insisted on taking her on one of her sleep-overs. No problem, said Leslie, directing him to a house. He waited until he saw her knock on the door and the door open, then drove off. Meanwhile, Leslie was saying to the stranger who opened the door that she was terribly sorry, she had gotten the wrong address, and moved off into the night.

About that time the [REDACTED] moved to their \$ 230,000 home in suburban Virginia, with its sunken whirlpool bathtub, large, airy bedrooms, rolling view. "We were trying to have a better place to live and all we did was find a higher class of druggies," said her mother with a rueful laugh.

One problem, say **drug** counselors, is a tacit acquiescence, with many modern parents tending to deny and overlook early warnings. Many were adolescents in the freewheeling '60s and remember the times that they did so-called recreational **drugs**. They tend to assume that their children will go through a phase of experimenting with pot and

alcohol. However, many parents are unaware of such facts as those in a recent study, which points out that the marijuana of today is three times as potent as what they smoked in the '60s. And that alcohol and pot are also "gateway" **drugs** -- teen-agers who use them to escape from the painful realities of adolescence often go on to harder **drugs**. Most parents are stunned to learn the amount and variety the **drug**-abusing teen and preteen can consume and the lengths they will go to hide it.

The [REDACTED] knew something was wrong. Leslie's friends were mainly "scuzzies." She was a stranger in their home, and was having severe trouble sleeping ("my muscles would twitch something awful"). The lies and denials were going full tilt, as were the battles. "We never had a dinner without a fight," her father says. "I was angry at everyone, all the time," his wife says.

There was still no definitive evidence of **drugs**. Then one day Leslie smoked pot at home, with a friend in her bedroom. Her older stepbrother, J.D. came home early and smelled it. He had long suspected his stepsister but had said nothing. This was the final straw. J.D., who was studying law enforcement, called his father at work. Leslie tried to alibi, saying she had only tried it once to see what it was like. But life had so deteriorated at school and home that the parents sought out the school counselor and this time asked for help. She gave them the name of another couple who had gone to Straight.

The [REDACTED] attended an open meeting and listened to adolescents who looked like their daughter run through their list of **drugs**; they saw a packed room of middle-class parents who looked like them. "I knew right then we had a **drug** problem," John [REDACTED] says. "I was actually relieved," says his wife, who was secretly worried Leslie might have some incurable mental problem.

Later, "when I read off that list of what she took," said her stepfather, "I just sat down and bawled."

The Disease Leslie, who has just graduated from Straight, was in the final phase of the program at the time of this interview. But there were many months when the [REDACTED] wondered if they would ever get there -- or if they would last until she did. Its uncompromising program is terrifically difficult for both **drug**-abusing teen-agers and their parents. But, its proponents say, it works.

The rigid restrictions and hard rules are necessary, both physically and psychologically, they say. "A 14-year-old doing **drugs** isn't able to make his decisions," says Hardman.

It is startling to see once-"hip" adolescents shouting "I love you!," hugging and crying in rap sessions and joining in on such sing-along songs as "You Are My Sunshine" or "Little Red Caboose."

John [REDACTED] says that he balked at the idea of having other **drug**-hooked teen-agers in their home. "My reaction was, 'Good God, I couldn't handle one druggie kid, how could I handle four or five who aren't even mine?' " His voice chokes with emotion. "I have learned to really love these kids."

Initially, Sandy [REDACTED] recalls, "I was very angry at the rules." For the first phase, Leslie stayed with parents of another druggie. Her parents had no idea who they were or where they lived. It was months before she earned the right to come home.

"She would earn 'talk' " (which meant she could talk to her parents for eight minutes at the end of open meeting every Friday night), remembers her mother. "Then she would do something to be set back. When she wouldn't get talk, I would be devastated."

Like most in the program, Leslie was highly resistant, denying she had a **drug** problem. "None of these programs is perfect," says Sandy. But ultimately the [REDACTED] felt that if the program had been less tough, Leslie would have conned everyone, run through the steps, gotten out and started **drugs** all over again.

Equally hard was accepting their own role in the problem, peeling away the facades, rationalizations and role playing of a wrecked family.

"The staff would say to the parents, 'You have a disease.' I would really rail against that," says Sandy. "One night one of the directors said, 'Call it something else if you like,' and went on to say that the whole family system changes when you've got a kid doing **drugs**. The family is out of control." Different roles are taken on by siblings and parents. Some become scapegoats or peacemakers; other are defensive or passively remove themselves.

"I blamed the children, blamed my husband. I was always ticked off," says Sandy. "I had to learn that I was really enabling Leslie. We'd be fighting over something involving her -- and there'd be Leslie, going out the front door." Her husband's son Jason, in the same grade as Leslie, so hated the fights that he became the clown in order to make everyone laugh. This served only to bury the problem. Says Sandy, "When everyone is playing games, putting on roles, your family is diseased."

Through the program, Leslie learned to come to grips with and accept her deep sense of abandonment by her natural father.

Today, in the [REDACTED] household one evening, there seems almost a complete lack of facade. Jason walks into the room and talks easily about things that, the [REDACTED] say, never used to be discussed.

The family came to realize that Leslie -- who had been rejected by the more studious, more involved class members -- turned to a **drug** crowd in an attempt to belong. Now the whole family is supportive of her return to school. "It's hard," says her stepfather. "You're not a part of any group. The straight kids were never her friends and all the druggie friends want to get you back." Straight forbids its clients to have contact with others from the past, forcing them to stand up to negative peer pressure.

"Leslie used to be really really withdrawn," says Jason. "Now she's such an outgoing person. She has her own mind and is a lot more happy." One of the most difficult aspects of Straight is the restrictions it places on siblings. "There are a lot of things we can't do," says Jason in the weeks before Leslie graduated. "We can't have friends over when first-phasers are in the house. I can't have friends over when my sister is here by herself. Can't have parties. Can't use the phone much at night when they're doing 'dime' therapy" (talking to others in the program on the phone at night). The older brother, J.D., has the same restrictions as the parents on alcohol -- they can't have anything to drink, not even a glass of wine, for six hours before seeing Leslie or the other girls living in the house, which makes drinking almost impossible. Instead of just locking up the liquor cabinet, as Straight demands, the Fedors stopped drinking altogether.

The [REDACTED] missed the freedom of stopping off for a drink and dinner after work, the vacations they couldn't take while in the program. Even an impromptu movie was off limits with program newcomers in the house.

But they feel they have a family now, instead of five unhappy people living separate lives in the same house.

For them, the 19 months were ultimately short.

Leslie has been a graduate for one month. "I'm thrilled at her progress," says her mother. "She hasn't gone crazy with getting out as some do."

Leslie voiced her only concern as she prepared to graduate. "I'm scared about going back to feeling lonely. I don't say scared to go back to **drugs**, but being lonely, because that's the reason I did **drugs**."

Straight emphasizes the need for constant support, such as Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, after youths leave the program. And for the first time, Leslie now sees a goal after high school. She works in a shoe store and is considering a job in merchandising.

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"We did our part as parents," says Sandy, "but ultimately the child has to do it. The program gave her the tools to cope."

And the family hopes enough trust has been built to deal with future problems.

"Come see how things are in two years," says Leslie's mother, making a knock-on-wood gesture. "That," she says, "will be the real test."

Tomorrow: The pros and cons of Straight.

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**SERIES:** Part 1 of 2

**GRAPHIC:** Photo, **Straight Inc.** clients link arms during a therapy session. (**Straight Inc.** clients link arms during therapy session), Darrel Ellis; Photo, Leslie [REDACTED], **drug-free** for the past 19 months. (Leslie [REDACTED]), Darrel Ellis

**TYPE:** FEATURE, SERIES

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