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## **The Many Sides of Straight; Hard-Edged **Drug** Therapy: a Triumph or a Torture?**

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Last November, ██████ looking even younger than his 14 years, stood in front of Nancy Reagan and Princess Diana and announced: "My name is ██████ ... The **drugs** I've done are pot, alcohol, PCP, cocaine, hash and inhalants. I've done these **drugs** for 2 1/2 years."

It was **Straight Inc.**'s regular Friday night open meeting of parents, clients and visitors. The first lady brought the princess to the Greater Washington Straight **drug** abuse treatment center in Springfield to dramatize America's **drug** epidemic and rehabilitation programs.

A sullen ██████, hair to his shoulders, had been literally dragged into the program. "It took me and another guy bigger than myself to bring him in," said his father ██████ a Charlotte, N.C., car dealer.

Today ██████, who had driven his son up from Charlotte to attend a Friday night meeting at Straight, smiles fondly at his 5-foot-2 son, who now looks like a Spielberg movie kid, with a grin that lights up the room.

At age 10, ██████ started out as a "dry druggie -- someone faking [the effect], "just trying to be cool," he explains. Then came months of being stoned at school, fights with his parents. "When I couldn't find real **drugs** I'd do anything, huffing on glue, drying out banana peels and trying to smoke them, insane stuff."

But ██████ **drug** abuse, like most other cases encountered by psychiatrists specializing in adolescence, was really a symptom of other, far deeper problems his parents refused to recognize.

"Our family really wasn't a family," he says now. "I thought my parents were the ones that had the problem -- they were the ones who were drinking a lot. Finally I got to the point where I tried to kill myself in front of Dad."

Inside, says ██████, "I was sick of the way I felt all the time. I was pale from all the **drugs**. I got to the stage where I had to get high just to feel normal."

Desperate in their attempts to deal with ██████, his parents took him to "some shrink and I hated the guy," ██████ remembers. They then committed him to a psychiatric institution in North Carolina where, he remembers, he was tranquilized with "Valium and Thorazine ... I got high for free."

Finally, they sought out Straight, ending up in its 4-year-old Virginia facility, one of eight such centers nationwide. ██████ lived with families of Washington area druggies in the program, but his parents drove up from Charlotte for meetings every Friday night. ██████ rebelled there initially also, but now says the program brought him and his family

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together. His mother realized she had a drinking problem and is now a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. "She's been sober 48 days less than me," he says with a smile. "Ever since last Christmas."

For the [REDACTED], **Straight Inc.** was a salvation. But there are other scenarios.

Lawsuits have been filed against Straight facilities by parents and children, alleging everything from virtual imprisonment of patients to verbal and physical attacks. Lawyers and their clients contend that teens in the program, intensely pressured by unlicensed and inadequately trained peers, exaggerate their confessions of **drug** use in order to appear candid and judged ready to move up the five stages of the program.

Straight officials deny the specific allegations of physical mistreatment, and say the restrictive program is necessary to help parents get control of their children and children get control of themselves. And they say past mistakes have been remedied. "In the past 24 months we have made dramatic strides in improving both the structure and our services," said Mel Riddle, Straight's national executive director.

Straight facilities run patients through daylong encounter sessions, plus open evening meetings twice weekly with parents. Group rap sessions are characterized by a wild waving of raised hands, termed "motivating" -- an intense form of asking to be called on. "If you don't do it, they make you stand up and curse at you," says John [REDACTED], who ran away from the Cincinnati program and became **drug-free** at a more orthodox treatment center. "The peer pressure is intense. They make you feel you have to tell the worst possible story, make you feel you're supposed to cry."

At any Straight facility, you can see "oldcomers" holding on to the belt buckles of "newcomers" whenever they move through the halls, go to the bathroom, line up for food.

Most Straight clients say they hate this first phase, designed both to teach them "humility" and keep them monitored. For [REDACTED], it was "really degrading ... you can tell they're loving their authority. Even when you took a shower ... another guy stands there holding your wrist. I don't know what they think you're going to do."

While some teens get through the entire program in a few months, the average time is a year. They can be sent back to the first phase for such infractions as running away or being judged uncooperative.

For first-phasers, life is no television, no books, an intense 12-hour day of rap sessions at the facility, plus living in a stranger's home with locked windows and alarms on bedroom doors. They have to ask permission to speak, to eat, to go to the bathroom.

You can tell the length of time many of the girls have been in Straight by the number of inches of grown-out dyed hair. No makeup, no blow dryers are allowed, and hair must be pinned back from the face -- restrictions designed to turn girls from the teen-age preoccupation with looks to concentration on their "inner self."

In second phase, clients return to their parents' homes, but first-phasers are sent with them to live in that household under stiff restrictions that include no socializing with anyone outside the program.

At third phase, they return to school but cannot speak to their old "druggie" friends, cannot date and risk being sent back to first phase if discovered doing so. The fourth and fifth phases concentrate on moving back into the community and tapering off the time spent at Straight.

Straight says about 70 percent of its clients complete the program and of that number, three-fourths are still **drug-free** two years later.

Of the 30 percent who don't complete the course, many bolt with the freedom of third phase. Some leave for good, but rap sessions are filled with stories of those who left, lapsed into **drugs** and returned.

Suzanne Byrd Hardman, the Greater Washington Straight director, says the organization changed some procedures after

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one celebrated case.

Fred Collins III, a Virginia resident, won \$ 220,000 in damages after a jury found he had been detained against his will in the Florida Straight facility for more than four months four years ago. Straight appealed, but the award was upheld last year. Those over 18 can now leave the program immediately if they wish. Minors can also -- if parents consent.

Three former clients testified at Collins' trial -- including Jeffrey [REDACTED] who said he was tied up in a car with nylon ropes at one point at the Virginia facility but escaped. Says Hardman: "I have never seen a client in any way artificially restrained."

There have been no recent suits against the Greater Washington facility. Philip Hirschkop, Collins' lawyer, says a dozen angry parents have contacted him in the past year but declined to sue. He warned them, he said, that court action could bring public exposure to them and their children.

As recently as last spring, however, in response to complaints by parents, the program was found not in compliance with some medical and housing regulations by the Virginia department of mental health and mental retardation. Since then, "all negotiations between licensing and the Straight program have been resolved to the satisfaction of both parties," says Hardman.

Nancy and Angus Reed pulled their daughter out of the program after her nose was accidentally broken by a wildly waving girl sitting next to her during a rap session. Nancy Reed, a nurse, said she and her husband were not notified of the injury when it happened, though their daughter was having "blurred vision and headaches." When they finally did see her more than a week later, they took her to a private physician who, Nancy Reed says, told them their daughter had severe sinus complications that ultimately required surgery.

The Reeds still praise the "philosophy of Straight," and say this is the main reason they did not sue. "I know it helps these kids -- but it has to be run right," says Nancy Reed. Some parents who leave the program -- or are "terminated" by Straight -- say they are singled out for hostile treatment by the Springfield facility's executive staff if they complain, and complaints are used against their children in rap sessions.

Hardman would not comment on the Reed case. "I am not at liberty to discuss individual clients because of the confidentiality. However, families that come to us often come with varying degrees of dysfunction. Our goal is to help them become more functional. We are not always successful." Hardman denies parents' charges of hostile and rude treatment. "I doubt a program would survive 10 years if it took that therapeutic attack."

There seems no middle ground on Straight.

Matt [REDACTED], a 21-year-old graduate of the St. Petersburg, Fla., program and a counselor for 3 1/2 years at Springfield, says the program turned his life around. "I was a high school dropout in trouble with the law, used alcohol and pot and LSD and cocaine." After Straight, he returned to school and earned As and Bs. He now attends Virginia Tech, works as a landscaper, "just bought a house and am getting married on Saturday." Lyle says his parents tried counselors and psychiatrists before Straight, but "that was a joke."

As for harsh confrontations, [REDACTED] says, "sometimes it's needed. When you're doing **drugs** you're denying everything. The walls need to be broken down." [REDACTED] acknowledges that "sometimes staffers maybe get too harsh. If they get off target you talk to them."

On a Friday night in Springfield, Straight's aging warehouse facility throbs with emotion as parents choke up or cry and confront or praise their children, who sit in chairs facing them.

There are structured mechanisms for conversation. As the mike is passed, one mother chastises her son in front of the group for being put back to a lower phase. "I feel very disappointed in your sneaky behavior. It reminds me that time

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after time you betrayed our trust." She barely murmurs the mandatory "I love you." A boy shouts, amid tears, that he is off the first phase and "coming home!" and races across the gym-sized floor to hug his sobbing mother.

By these Friday night meetings, the teen clients have talked for six days of how life was when they were on **drugs**, how they are progressing; talk of guilt and anger and depression. Sentences are replete with expletives and teen-age jargon.

During one session, Jim [REDACTED] a senior staffer and former client at Straight, sits on a high stool facing 200 boys and girls. They are "motivating," waving their arms wildly, fingers flicking together, creating a sound of so many bird wings flapping. [REDACTED] surveys for a minute, then shouts out a name like a drill sergeant.

A tall, raw-boned girl stands up and says she saw her father at an open meeting. "He smiled at me and I smiled back ... When I came in, I lied. I said I did cocaine for two years straight every other day and I only did it seven times. I wanted my parents to feel I was this big huge **drug** addict. I wanted them to feel guilty ... I don't really feel like I have a friend in here ..."

Hands are flapping, but [REDACTED] first has his own say. "I think you're still BS'ing us," he tells the girl. "You're getting nowhere doing that. You can stay in first phase six months ... You don't have any friends; that's your own fault."

A boy, furiously waving his arms, is then acknowledged. "All this loving-your-father stuff. Earlier, you said you hate his [expletive] guts. Why don't you start getting real?" In this particular rap, clients are asking for earned privileges -- such as the right to speak to their parents ("talk") at open meeting, the right to handle responsibilities such as standing guard at the door, taking first-phasers to the bathroom or cleaning up.

The tall girl who was asking for talk sat down and [REDACTED] shouted, "Who says 'talk?'" No hands. "Who says 'no talk?'" All hands. A staff of 10 professionals makes the final decisions, Hardman says, but for now the girl has been publicly and harshly voted down by her peers.

Over the hours, a basic theme is pounded out continuously: the necessity to "get honest" and confess all. The more the teen-agers talk about feeling scared, lonely, afraid of going home or back to school, or tell stories filled with guilt and remorse for their past, the more they are rewarded with comforting arms and supportive comments.

A boy who has gotten off first phase after several weeks sobs. "I'm really scared to go home. Really scared I am going to screw it up." [REDACTED] tone softens. "You're thinking about arguing with your parents. But you're getting to go home, take a shower by yourself, go to the bathroom by yourself. Get off first phase. I think you've got to look on the brighter side."

The boy brushes his tears and sits down to a loud chorus, spoken by rote and mandatory: "LOVE YOU!"

But the mood shifts abruptly when another boy stands and says he's been having problems and has been trying to talk them over "with a certain person for about a week now." Everyone gets excited and one "motivates" wildly, then shouts: "What's the problem talking to your group? First you're saying 'I want to get the blank out of here' and now [you] talk to one person. What about us? You're not letting us know what's going on."

The boy looks stunned, almost stricken. He stumbles on: "I'm trying to." Another boy is shouting at him: "You should see the look on your face ... You're trying to con us to get out of here. You can't con a con. There's a lot of good ones in here." Another says "Everyone gave you a chance ... If you want to slide by, you'll get yelled at."

Gilmore shouts, "Who says he gets nothing?" All raise their hands. Suddenly, the boy bolts for the doors, all guarded by fifth-phasers. Five boys pull him to the floor. One cradles his head as the others hold him sobbing on the floor, enveloped in both restraint and comfort.

The rest of the group listen to others: "Look, do you want to be 50 and doing **drugs?**" says one youth to another who

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wants to leave the program. "Thinking of that is what helps me out."

While the rougher raps recall a page out of the Esalen encounters, others are less confrontational. There are discussions on good and bad ways to express anger, emphasis on reciting the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, which Straight uses. When someone confesses loneliness or fear or anger, others start their responses with "I can relate to you ..." And periodically, throughout the meetings, they sing together to break the tension -- sing-along songs like "Working on the Railroad," childhood songs like "Little Red Caboose." Simultaneously, Straight is working constantly with the teen-ager's family -- increasingly the focus of other rehabilitation programs, as well, such as Second Genesis.

Straight, however, is unique in that parents house other teen-agers as well as their own, must attend meetings and give up most of their social lives to the program. Host homes are the reason Straight can charge patients only about \$ 20 a day, far less than most rehabilitation programs.

Many who praise the program say it forces families to come together. At the tearful Friday night sessions, fathers often say the program taught them how to say "I love you" to their children, taught them to participate in their lives. But critics attack what they view as a good concept gone wrong in practice, with children becoming robots in an atmosphere of Big Brother surveillance.

A recent civil lawsuit against the Cincinnati Straight program alleges that a teen-ager named Wendi [REDACTED] was attacked and beaten by others in the program, both at the Straight facility and at her host home, a charge Straight denies.

Johnathan Schiff, an Ohio lawyer, successfully represented four juveniles who ran away from Cincinnati **Straight Inc.**, "keeping them from being forced back into the program," he said.

Schiff is now representing Eric Weaver, who claims Straight's "unlicensed and untrained" staff harassed him so much that he clawed permanent scars on parts of his body. The lawsuit contends that his parents were told Eric was "progressing in a normal manner: that his change in personality ... and self-mutilation were normal developments in the treatment process; and that his marked deterioration and physical appearance were a result of normal grappling with issues of **drug** dependence." Straight officials refuse to comment on the case since it is still in court.

In Atlanta, Susan [REDACTED] sued Straight for "medical malpractice, false imprisonment, assault and battery, statutory violations, fraud and intentional infliction of emotional distress." Verbal and physical harassment occurred, attorney Kathleen Wilde contends, because her client refused to admit to a **drug** problem "she didn't even have."

White was put on a diet of peanut butter and water for 29 days, became ill and received inadequate medical attention, the suit contends. Wilde also charges that Suzanne Hardman -- then at the Atlanta Straight facility and now director of the center in Springfield -- supervised the diet.

Hardman says: "According to records, I was in charge of the Atlanta facility, but I was in the process of moving out. I have no recollection of that client." Was she on a peanut-butter-and-water diet? "Not that I know of." Would Hardman have recommended it? "No. We have rules: Food is not used either as punishment or reward."

Straight recently settled out of court for an undisclosed amount in [REDACTED] case.

Virginia's Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation licenses rehabilitation programs such as Straight. The program has been asked to comply with regulations designed to assure client rights. One rule seems to go against the basic philosophy of Straight, particularly its restrictive first phase. It says the client shall have the right to communicate "in confidence with any person by mail or telephone."

Hardman says she is confident a satisfactory compromise can be met. "We believe we are in compliance with the intent of their rules, and individual situations would always be taken into account."

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At one recent Friday night open session, visitors considering the program for their children witnessed the emotional graduation from Straight of five clients and their parents, who told the group what Straight had meant to them.

The visitors were then taken into a room where Suzanne Hardman asked if there were any more questions. A crucial aspect of the program is having enough parents to provide host homes; Straight regards these open sessions as vital in reaching outsiders.

A man and his new wife said they suspected his stepdaughter was using **drugs**. They wondered how they could possibly convince the teen-ager she should come to Straight.

Hardman left no doubt that Straight considered that decision up to them, not the child.

"As it is with any other illness," she said "you wouldn't hesitate about taking her to the doctor. You would simply do it."

The man walked out of the Straight facility, thinking it over.

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

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**GRAPHIC:** Photo, [REDACTED] listens as a member of a **Straight, Inc.** group discusses a problem. Darrel Ellis -- TWP

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