



By J. Henson — The Capital

Eighteen-year-old Eric [redacted] is finding help in beating his drug habit through his parents, John M. and Margaret "Peggy" [redacted] and Straight, a drug treatment program which will open a resource center in Anne Arundel Jan. 25.

## Treatment 'like watching a miracle unfold'

By EVE ROSE  
Staff Writer

The day Walburga [redacted] looked under her son's mattress and found a mirror, razor blades and an empty plastic pen used to snort cocaine, she ran to the river near her Pasadena

home and threw the paraphernalia into the waves.

It didn't take long for the 53-year-old to realize that the tide would not wash away her son Dwight's \$400-a-week cocaine habit.

One day in the family's garden,

blood gushed from Dwight's nose. The cocaine had gnawed away at his nostrils, causing hemorrhaging.

How could this be, the insurance claims investigator wondered. Her 17-year-old son who only a year earlier was making plans for college had the

shakes, slept all day, and free-based cocaine all night.

The next time Ms. [redacted] found her son's stash, she crumbled into a ball in the corner of her study. Friends later took her to a hospital.

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# STRAIGHT

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She had a nervous breakdown.

A year later, few things about Walburga and Dwight are the same.

But it took a highly regimented, controversial drug treatment program — Straight Inc. — to help Dwight and other Anne Arundel teen-agers change.

For Ms. [redacted], there was no choice.

A divorced mother who came to this country from Germany after she married an American, Ms. [redacted] had no family to help her after her breakdown, only friends.

She knew she had to do something soon, but the 12-year-old boy who swore when his parents divorced that his mother would always be his best friend now scared her.

The cocaine had not only eaten away at Dwight's nose, but had distorted his judgment.

He pounded his fist through walls and dealt drugs to other teen-agers. One night, hysterical from so much cocaine and feeling suicidal, Dwight ran down the street carrying a knife.

"I thought, 'It's either me or him,'" Ms. [redacted] said.

So, one week before Dwight's senior prom and five weeks before his high school graduation, Ms. [redacted] made what she considers the best decision of her life.

She asked Dwight's former boss to pick up her son on the pretense of taking him out for breakfast.

Before Dwight knew it, he was on the highway, traveling the 50-some miles to Springfield, Va., the headquarters of Straight Inc.

One day earlier this month, Dwight, Eric [redacted], 18; and another teen-ager, 16-year-old Paul [redacted], spoke of their past and the program which they say has saved their lives.

Straight — used by 18 out of 30 parents identified by the county as having children in need of long-term alcohol and drug abuse treatment — is scheduled to open a resource center in Annapolis' West Garrett Place on Jan. 25.

Dwight, Eric and Paul are still in treatment, having progressed to the program's latter stages, and are attending high school in south county. In the afternoons and evenings, they return to Virginia for therapy.

Straight's philosophy is based on the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, and a belief that peer pressure forced the youths to use, so peer pressure can help them stop.

During the day, "old-comers" — those who have been in the program longer — watch the newcomers' every move.

Intensive group and individual therapy sessions led by trained psychologists often use confrontation to get young people to admit their drug abuse.

"These kids are so used to blaming everyone else and we want them to begin to accept responsibility for themselves," said Lorna Malooley, assistant administrator for resource development at Straight.

"We tell a participant that he's responsible for smashing a window, he's responsible for stealing his parent's credit card, he's responsible for his actions."

The Anne Arundel families in Straight drive back and forth to Virginia and adhere to the strict schedules and inconvenient rules because they swear that, without the treatment structure, their children would still be abusing drugs and alcohol or, even worse, they would be dead.

When Paul [redacted] was 11, he began smoking, smoking and hallucinating his way through a childhood that was destined to end in a cemetery, said his mother, Cindy.

Paul, a quiet child, would run away for weeks at a time, hitchhiking or stealing cars that the Glen Burnie youth and his friends would drive as far away as South Carolina.

Blackouts, flashbacks and overdoses were common as the unruly teen-ager drowned himself in drugs.



DWIGHT [redacted]  
... in drug treatment.

"I tried everything," said Mrs. [redacted], a teachers aide.

"I had done all I could and I prayed, 'Oh please, Lord, take my son, and put an end to his misery.'"

Straight was the [redacted] last resort after an unsuccessful try at a psychiatric institute.

"It's like watching a miracle unfold," she said of her son, who has been in treatment for more than a year. "Paul knows who he is now and he is very, very strong."

But while some parents praised the program, others have called Straight's methods authoritarian and psychologically abusive and have sued the organization, seeking amends for the damage they claim Straight inflicted on their children.

Straight's administrators defend the state-accredited program, saying the lawsuits are no different than malpractice suits many hospitals face.

They also said the parents — some of whom have recently gone on national television talk shows to air their complaints — did not stick with the program long enough, or did not want to change themselves.

"Straight is not for everyone," said Ms. Malooley.

Straight was founded 13 years ago in Florida by a group of parents fed up with other treatment programs.

The idea took hold and now, the Springfield branch is one of six, joining others in Florida, Detroit, Atlanta and Boston.

The program can last anywhere from 10 to 20 months, costing approximately \$9,000, compared to other more expensive programs offered by many private hospitals.

Young people live with host families whose children are in treatment, which along with intensive fund-raisers — including a telethon on the Shopper's Network — has helped defray costs.

A hallmark of the program is that the patient's family must actively participate in therapy. Siblings of users are also counseled to prevent them from turning to drug and alcohol abuse.

Twice weekly, parents must go to therapy sessions in Springfield.

After close to two months or so, participants, from their early teens to their early 20s, return to their own families to live.

Dwight and Paul live with Eric [redacted]'s parents in Davidsonville, because their own parents live too far away from Springfield for the daily commute.

Their spacious home overlooking the South River is known as the "house of change," because most teen-agers who stay there during treatment are successful, Ms. [redacted] said.

The house has an alarm on it, as do the bedrooms where more than 100 teen-agers have lived during treatment.

For John and Peggy [redacted], the notion that a child might run away while enrolled in the program is not outrageous.

After 22 days in Straight treatment, their son, then 17, ran away. In five days, Eric said he did LSD four times.

"You would not have wanted to know me back then," he said.

The former Crofton youth began filling his young body with alcohol



Margaret [redacted], John M. [redacted] and their son, Eric, at their Davidsonville home.

Photo by J. Hanson — The Capital

and marijuana at age 12. It didn't take more than a year or so before he began using cocaine, LSD and PCP, or phencyclidine.

His parents, immersed in denial for many years, sent him to private schools, a military academy and a psychiatric institute that treated adolescent substance abusers.

No matter how hard they tried, nothing seemed to work, they said.

At 17, Eric turned to crack. Nothing worked quite like crack, he said.

It numbed his body to a point he'd never known. But the highly potent cocaine derivative that he said is as easy to get in the county as a pack of cigarettes scared him. It made his heart race faster and faster until he thought it was going to explode.

One day, John [redacted], the successful owner of an orthopedic supply firm, wrestled his son into the car and forced him to go to Straight.

After his escape, his father, a priest and members of the family's prayer group again forced Eric into a car and back to Straight, where he has stayed for 10 months.

The [redacted], who adopted Eric when he was 5, often ask themselves why he turned to drugs, and the desire to blame themselves is a difficult temptation to resist.

"I know that I am powerless over his addiction," [redacted] said.

The teen-agers said they turned to drugs for many reasons, but the greatest factor was peer pressure from other teens.

"There was so much insanity in

our home, and I feel that Straight saved our lives," said Peggy [redacted], who stopped pursuing a graduate degree and has put the rest of her life on hold so she can devote herself to the program.

Dwight, who calls Mrs. [redacted], "mom," said he does not know where he would be if it wasn't for Straight.

The bright teen-ager with a keen memory said he felt badly for hurting his mother and often wondered what happened to the other teens who bought drugs from him.

"Straight let me see how much I was hurting myself and my family," he said.

After nine months in treatment, Dwight's life is still filled with the program's many rules, and his vocabulary is sprinkled with Straight language.

He speaks of "enablers," people such as parents who allowed the young person to use by denying that a drug or alcohol problem existed; "setbacks," a time when a participant who slips back into rebellious, anti-authoritarian "druggie" behavior and is treated as though he had just entered the program and escorted into therapy sessions by other participants who hold him by his belt loops; and "concerns," the act of telling a counselor about the poor behavior or problems of another participant.

While Dwight has earned days off from treatment, he must apply in writing for such privileges as a trip

to McDonald's or an afternoon at the movies.

For a female reporter to talk with Dwight, Eric or Paul had to be in the room, because while in Straight, participants are not allowed to be alone with someone of the opposite sex.

At one point when Eric left the room, Dwight called him back, reminding him of the rule.

"You would not believe the change in these kids," said [redacted].

"The rules are extreme, but the hope is that when they go back into the world they will find a medium place between the strictness of Straight and the way they were in their past."

Eric said he never thought he would make it and is proud of who he is today.

"I go to movies, the mall, play go-carts, and I'm learning to live sober."

Paul, Eric and Dwight are best friends. They stay up late at night, sometimes till 2 a.m., talking to each other or "newcomers."

Their world is still in the extreme, with strict rules replacing the anarchy of their past. But they have made the transition back to high school.

Soon, they will graduate from treatment, continuing with support groups like Narcotics Anonymous. Their parents are hopeful, but realistic.

Straight claims an overall success rate of about 60 percent.