

STRAIGHT SAVED LIFE OF SON, FATHER SAYS

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Robert L. Anderson's son is a strapping, 16-year-old youth who got into soccer, baseball, an honors academic program -- and drugs.

"My son is a drug addict," said Anderson, a city traffic engineer.

The youth has been in Straight Inc., a private treatment center in Springfield, for the past 13 months, said Anderson, who asked that his son's name not be published.

The Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services has begun action to close the center because it has consistently violated state licensure regulations.

Anderson, with several other Richmond-area parents who have children in the treatment program, attended an informal conference with representatives from Straight and the mental health department yesterday at the James Madison Building here.

After the three-hour conference, Anderson talked with a reporter about his son.

"Last January, he ran away from home. His mother and I are divorced. He lived with his mother. He's not a street-wise kid. This was very traumatic for us. He was gone a week, then 2 1/2 weeks," Anderson said.

"His mom and I got together and decided we had to do something. We talked with a lot of people and decided on Straight," he said.

"He didn't want to be there. He denied he had drug problems. As parents we didn't realize he had drug problems right away," he said.

"He's worked hard. We have been involved. He has matured considerably. He can communicate. He can share his feelings. He has a conscious. He's becoming a leader in the group. He's very caring. But the best thing is he's alive and he's sober," Anderson said.

He said his son used alcohol, marijuana, mushrooms, Freon inhalants and other substances. "There may be more. That's all I can remember," he added.

"He recently celebrated one year of sobriety. He was very proud of it. I'm very proud of him. He's worked hard," Anderson said.

Anderson didn't recognize his son's drug use at first.

"There were some behavior problems and some problems in school. His mother took him for some drug testing. Some (of the test results) were positive. We thought we could handle it with some family conferences. But we found we couldn't.

"I have since learned that a child is into drugs about two years before parents recognize it. My son had been doing drugs for two years. We had to get out of denial and recognize that there was a problem.

"Parents go through guilt after the denial. It must be all my fault. It's my child. But you are powerless over what your child does. We are taught that the adult has to be absolutely responsible for what the child does. That's not true," Anderson said.

His son comes home on weekends now, Anderson said. Some other children in the program come with him.

"They have raps. They don't go out any where. They keep journals on the weekends. They have to talk about themselves and how they are going to improve. It's a program of kids helping kids," Anderson said.

The parents of children in the program also help each other, he said.

Anderson attends parents' meetings in Springfield twice a week. Richmond parents of participants in the program also get together weekly here. "We provide support for each other," he said.

"I'm real pleased with Straight. It saved my child's life. He was into drugs to the point that he would have gotten into some kind of trouble. He would have died.

"It's not all roses. But he's doing well. I'm proud of him. His mother is real proud of him," Anderson said.

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