

**THIS WEEK INSIDE:**

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In search of a way to keep their addicted son alive, at least until he turned 18, the [redacted] family took a road rough traveled, down Straight Inc.'s narrow path.



## Troubled program is facing shutdown

**P**arents and child stand and square off before a gym filled with each generations' peers. This is a Friday night open meeting at Straight Inc.

"Steve," says the father, "I want you to know how disgusted I am when I think of you on your knees in the mud, in the rain, huffing Freon out of the air conditioner."

Straight, facing possible closure by Virginia health officials, is a tough, long-term treatment program for the addicted kid at the end of the line.

Some of the estimated 100 kids in the program are there by court order. Others arrive with exhausted parents who told them to get in the car, without saying where they were headed.

But Virginia state health officials are embroiled in efforts to revoke Straight's license for the second year in a row. While allegations of physical abuse made a year ago have been cleared, state officials say they are concerned about how host homes are monitored.

Host homes are the homes of client-families, where the kids in Straight stay during treatment.

State officials also say that 78 recent licensing violations, while corrected, show Straight has a history of disregard for state licensing, said Jacqueline Ennis, assistant commissioner on research, evaluation and data management for the state's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation & Substance Abuse Services.

Recent violations range from broken toilets to poorly recorded tuberculosis shots for staff, said Ms. Ennis.

Joy Margolis, Florida-based Straight's vice president of public relations, called the violations "bureaucratic in nature."

A hearing to see if Straight can retain its licenses — without going to court — has not been scheduled, said Ms. Ennis.

Meanwhile, newspaper articles also have alleged an incident of sexual abuse connected to the Springfield program, where about 10 Anne Arundel County families are under treatment.

"That has been blown completely out of proportion. A 13-year-old alleged that a 16-year-old touched him inappropriately when both

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# OF DRUGS AND DECEIT

STORIES BY ALLISON BLAKE / PHOTOS BY DAVID W. TROZZO

**T**hat was some birthday dinner.

"He just walked out," said the father.

"I went and did LSD," said the son.

His mother turned to him.

"You were a real jerk. One time, your father asked for your cigarettes and you punched three holes in the wall," she said.

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The scarred walls of the [redacted] south county home have been repaired, just as the family's leftover bruises are healing. Home is now a sanctuary, tucked down a road as long as the trek through 17-year-old son Jamin's addiction and recovery.

These days, Jamin is a kid with a gemstone twinkling from his left ear and a pet rat, Byron, circling his neck. He's real easygoing, and he laughs at himself. Like most 17-year-olds, he's toying with ideas for his future. He's retained one vice: cigarettes.

Life did not always seem so hopeful for Jamin, his mother Karen, father Charlie, or sister Willow. The teen's drug and alcohol abuse plagued the family from the time he was 12. During his most desperate moment, at age 14, Jamin found himself alone and suicidal at a special boarding school in New York.

"It was where I drank mouthwash. I tried to get high off everything possible," said Jamin.

Help came from controversial Straight Inc., a drug treatment center in Springfield, Va., now under fire from Virginia health officials trying to shut it down.

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## BACK TO REAL LIFE

• Seventeen-year-old Jamin [redacted] has been drug- and alcohol-free for 15 months, though as part of a deal with his parents he gets to keep his cigarettes, top.

• "I was suicidal toward the end (before Straight)" says Jamin, center, with parents, Charlie and Karen [redacted].

"Life's a lot different around here now," says his mom, of their peaceful south county home life.

• Jamin's taking it day by day, as he works at a boatyard, left, and regularly attends 12-step meetings. "I was in a cloud for so long," recalls the teen-ager, who now plans to complete his education.

## FROM THE FRONT PAGE

## JAMIN

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As far as the [redacted] are concerned, Straight's strict, tough program saved their family.

Straight reasons that the peer pressure that drives kids to drugs can be redirected to make them honest. Techniques used include limited physical restraint, confrontation and, at times, strip searches.

To Jamin, the strip searches performed when a client enrolls or a runaway returns seem necessary.

"I think it's very important," he said, noting the dishonest capabilities of addicts. "You squat, and you turn around."

Just how his mother's brown-eyed boy found himself in such a position is hard to say.

"He was always difficult," says Charlie, 42.

## TROUBLE COMES EARLY

A very gifted child with a knack for music, art and math, trauma came early to headstrong Jamin. When he was 3, his 7-month-old sister, Rosie, died of heart disease. "He was real angry about that," says Karen, now 39. The [redacted] had daughter Willow when Jamin was 4.

Jamin says he had his first drink at 8 or 9. During sixth grade, Jamin displayed his usual disregard for authority by doing things like going to the bathroom without the teacher's permission. That year brought suspension from school.

"Karen came to the job site; Jamin was in the car. She got out of the car and told me he was too outrageous to leave at home," said Charlie.

"He'd been yelling, threatening. He broke a whole dishwasher full of dishes. I went to the car; he'd locked himself in. I said, 'Either you open the door or I'll open the door.' And I took a hammer and broke the window, and reached in. He kicked me in the face."

Little Willow, meanwhile, kept quiet as the debris flew through the household. She learned to retreat to her room with a book.

"I liked him, but he made me mad," she said of her brother. Jamin stole money from the piggybank her father had brought her from Mexico. Once, he shot her in the foot with a BB gun.

"It was an accident," said Willow.

## 'I HATE MYSELF'

Then came the day 12-year-old Jamin announced his addiction to his family by arriving home from school — drunk.

Soon after, tensions high, Jamin's parents separated for a short time. Charlie moved out for three months.

"When I returned, my son just went nuts," said Charlie. "I came home one day and he was sullen. He barricaded himself in his room with his BB gun. My wife went in. I heard the gun go off."

"I broke down the door and caught myself with one hand on his throat and one hand in the air, about to hit him. He'd shot the gun into the ceiling. I said to my wife, 'Call the police.' I could no longer allow him to be on his own, and I could no longer trust myself to handle the problem," he said.

This came part-way through a string of special schools. By 14, Jamin had run through two special

"I liked him, but he made me mad."

— Willow [redacted]  
Jamin's sister

"...I could no longer trust myself to handle the problem."

Charlie [redacted]  
Jamin's father

"Life's really different around here now."

— Karen [redacted]  
Jamin's mother

education programs; two experimental schools; two stays at a psychiatric institute, or PI; two visits to police headquarters; a suicide threat; and countless windows, chairs and tables. Amid his final, 30-day stay at a psychiatric institute, Jamin scribbled "I hate myself" across his forehead with a ballpoint pen.

That's when the family turned to Straight. It was August 1988.

A doctor, Karen said, put it to her this way: "I don't know if Straight will work for Jamin or not, but it will keep him alive until he's 18."

"Jamin said they played a lot of volleyball at PI, so we stopped and bought him new sneakers," chuckled Karen, remembering the first ride to Springfield. "He thought he'd be playing a lot of volleyball."

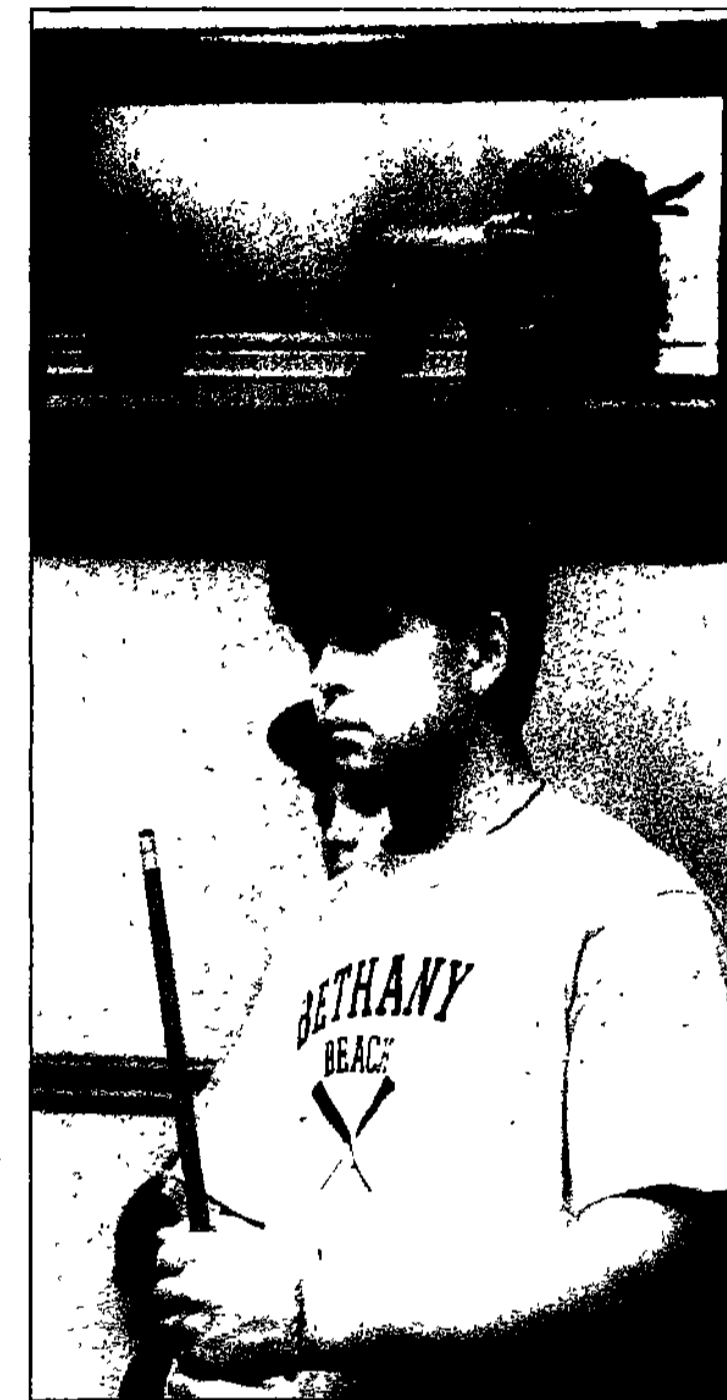
But admission into the facility was anything but funny.

"He got mad when he found out he couldn't smoke," said his mother. "I walked out," Jamin recalled.

His mother followed, and Jamin threatened to throw himself into busy Backlick Road, where Straight is located.

"I said, 'Jamin, you're going to die one of two ways. You're going to die of drugs, or you're going to die in this road.'"

And then Karen [redacted] — always the family peacekeeper —



By David W. Trozzo — The Capital  
Jamin Mattison, 17, has been sober for 15 months. Instead of getting high, he spends his days working, attending 12-step meetings and shooting pool at Bill & Billies Q Club with friends.

turned away from her son, and walked back in. Jamin followed.

## A FAMILY HEALING

At Straight, the whole family is in therapy. The [redacted] drove the 80-mile round trip to Springfield from two to seven days a week during Jamin's stay. Straight officials say most kids stay there about 14 months; Jamin was there twice as long.

"I wasn't willing to work the program," he said. "You'd sit in a chair all day long during group therapy. Other people take you to the bathroom. There's somebody watching you all the time. I was in a cloud for a long time."

"The program is based on honesty. Confrontation is very important in dealing with addicts. It helped me out a great deal, because I wouldn't listen," he said.

At open Friday night meetings, in a gym filled with 100 people, Jamin's family talked to him only over a microphone.

Willow, meanwhile, was just relieved to find other kids who know what it's like to have a sibling you don't trust.

"They'd all been through the same things," she said. "The fights between my parents and my

brother, getting things stolen, having police come to my house."

Like most kids at Straight, Jamin didn't want to be there. It was almost six months before he succumbed to the pressure of his peers, and started to admit his manipulative past.

That's when he began to get well. "I started crying and sharing," he said. "I started working."

Soon after, Jamin went home for the first time in nearly a year.

Charlie [redacted] will never forget how he felt.

"We were going to spend the day at home, as father and son, working around the house," he said.

"I was terrified," said Charlie. "I made three phone calls to other parents. It was embarrassing that I felt that way, but I was glad I could talk."

During his first months at Straight, Jamin stayed at the home of another program client. All kids stay in host homes, returning to their own homes only after they've gotten through the first phase of treatment.

When they do go home, they take other Straight kids to stay.

The [redacted] watched all the kids return to a childhood innocence. Jamin was becoming like "a very normal 10-year-old," laughed his mom.

## STRAIGHT

(Continued from Page E1)

were going on their way to take a shower. It did not happen on Straight property," said Ms. Margolis.

The incident, which Ms. Margolis said state officials failed to prove, allegedly occurred in a host home.

"That was not because of Straight," said Karen [redacted], whose 17-year-old son Jamin recently graduated from the program. "That's because of our society. My son never had an incident or occurrence or anything like that happen. Do they close a public school down because one of the teachers molested a student?"

The [redacted] south county alumni of short-term treatment and special school programs, say Straight works because it's a long-term program where entire families are held accountable for a child's addiction, and counseled.

At times, up to 24 county families have been enrolled at Straight, according to Scott Gilbert, the Springfield program's resource development planner. Last fall, Straight closed the satellite office it had maintained for about a year on West Street in Annapolis. Mr. Gilbert said the program opens and closes such administrative offices as an area's population may require.

If the Springfield program closes, county families could be transferred to another East Coast Straight facility, said Mr. Gilbert. But, he said: "We're not anticipating a problem."

At Straight, clients from 13 to 28 years of age work through five phases to sobriety. The program is based on the 12 steps, with emphasis on accepting a higher spirituality.

When a kid comes to Straight, he can count on doing nothing at first.

"All responsibility is taken away," said Mr. Gilbert. "They don't have to make their bed or decide what clothes to wear. All they have to do is decide how they wound up in a long-term treatment program."

Others were also making up for lost time.

"One kid was overage. He'd been dealing drugs in a fancy hotel as a doorman. He carried a gun," said Karen. "Of all things in the [redacted] home, the bunk beds impressed this former tough guy the most."

## STARTING OVER

Despite his progress, Jamin ran away from Straight more than a year after he started. He spent the weekend getting high with a friend.

He had to start over. Once again, he was accompanied everywhere he went. He was challenged to tell the truth. He couldn't return to school until he moved from the first phase of treatment.

Despite his exit, Jamin knew he needed help. As his mother put it: "Jamin deserves a chance at a good life."

In December, Jamin and his family did graduate from Straight, the goal they'd set for themselves 28 months before.

Being weaned from the closed world of Straight hasn't been altogether easy. Jamin attends Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous meetings and feels strongly about his new confidence and spirituality.

"The fear is there," said Charlie. "He's beginning to develop more

confidence as time goes by." Adds Karen: "Life's really different around here now."

Jamin's seen a few friends from his drug and alcohol days, but he doesn't go out with them. A big night out is the Saturday midnight Narcotics Anonymous meeting with his new friends from the 12-step meetings.

Last summer, at Straight, he volunteered to help handicapped children. Since he likes to draw, he's hoping to combine the two loves into his future, as an art therapist. For now, Jamin is working as a boatyard laborer and planning to take his Graduate Equivalency Diploma test.

Looking toward the future is something new for Jamin [redacted] who's been sober for 15 months.

"I know I'm going to help people — as far as they help themselves out," he said. As for Straight?

"The place saved my life. I'd be dead now if I hadn't gone through Straight. I was doing drugs; I didn't care what I was putting in my body — I mean, I really hated myself."

"I was suicidal toward the end, before Straight."

"Whether it's good or bad or I didn't like it, it really doesn't matter. It's a true mirror of what goes on. Whether people don't like it or whatever — I call it a miracle."