

As the drug treatment program draws national acclaim, ex-clients in lawsuit describe torments at local center

By MILO GEYELIN
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

1/30/83
At a visit to Straight Inc. a year ago, Nancy Reagan wept as teen-agers stood and told her of the horrors of their drug abuse.

But recently, some former Straight clients and their parents have described torments of another kind inside the highly acclaimed St. Petersburg-based drug treatment center at 3001 Gandy Blvd.

In sworn statements filed in federal court last month as part of a lawsuit against Straight Inc., three former clients have painted a behind-the-scenes picture of harassment and abuse at Straight practiced by both Straight clients and Straight staff members in St. Petersburg.

The allegations have been denied under oath by Straight clinical director Miller Newton, who is in charge of treatment practices at

Straight's branches in Pinellas County, Sarasota, Atlanta, Cincinnati and, most recently, Springfield, Va.

"IT'S NOTHING new. We've been through it before," said Newton, 44, when contacted by the *St. Petersburg Times* and asked to respond to the complaints. "It's all the same old c-p warmed over . . . Grandiose exaggeration goes along with alcohol and drug abuse. That's part of the disease."

The allegations, made under oath in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Va., are part of a lawsuit against Straight filed by former Straight client Fred Collins. Collins claims he was shanghaied into Straight while visiting his brother at the St. Petersburg center last year. He says he was held in Straight facilities — both in St. Petersburg and Virginia — against his will for more than five months until he ran away last November.

His suit asks for \$750,000 in punitive damages and a judge's ruling against what his suit describes as "abusive treatment . . . false imprisonment, assault and intentional infliction of emotional distress."

TO SUPPORT Collins' claims, 11 affidavits from former clients, parents of former clients and parents and friends of current Straight enrollees have been filed with his suit. Three of the statements allege that, at Straight's St. Petersburg's facility, these events occurred:

✓ **Beatings:** Two former clients claim they were beaten, thrown against walls and struck by teen-age clients in groups for hours at a time because they refused to participate in Straight's program.

See STRAIGHT 4-B

Sleep deprivation: One former teen-age client aims she was deprived of sleep — "marathon" — for more than three days, during which she claims she was mocked, humiliated and physically abused.

Poor medical treatment: Two of the former clients claim they were denied medical care at Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters. Medication for an infection was said to be denied in one case, allergy shots and treatment for a fungus were said to be denied in the other case.

Isolated confinement and restricted diets: Three former clients, including Collins, claim that recalcitrant and disruptive clients were punished with restricted diets of peanut-butter sandwiches and water for more than two weeks at a time and that other clients were put away in isolation rooms for periods of two weeks and longer.

Physical and mental harassment: Believable clients who "misbehaved" or tried to leave Straight were routinely forced to lie on the floor and were sat upon by groups of other Straight clients, according to two sworn statements.

The sworn statements contain some of the most serious allegations ever lodged against Straight during its controversial six-year history in Pinellas County. They come during a watershed year for Straight, at a time when the program's group therapy — "kids helping kids" — approach to drug treatment has begun to receive national acclaim.

LAST SUMMER, Straight received a glowing review from the state agency responsible for licensing the program — the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) (Story, 1-B).

According to Straight's supporters, such as Dr. Robert DuPont, former founding director of the National Institute for Drug Abuse, Straight is one of the best drug treatment centers in the country — a model for others.

DuPont and other supporters, including parents and clients who have had successful experiences at Straight, contend that the program turns antisocial drug addicts into goal-oriented, highly motivated, drug-free members of society.

Clinical director Newton says Straight has treated about 3,000 teen-agers during the past six years and that the program enjoys a 60 percent success rate. Those kinds of figures helped attract Nancy Reagan to Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters last February while on a two-day national tour of drug treatment programs.

SINCE THEN, Straight has announced ambitious plans to raise \$1.2-million by the end of 1986 and open 26 new branches nationwide.

Two weeks ago, Straight broke ground for a new \$250,000 national headquarters at its current location at 3001 Gandy Blvd. Later this year, Straight plans to begin building a \$350,000 national training center in St. Petersburg that will offer workshops and seminars for drug counselors, parents and community members.

Still, Straight continues to attract controversy over its treatment methods, labeled by critics as brainwashing. The abuses described in the affidavits filed in Alexandria, however, describe practices that Straight officials say they would not tolerate if they were true. Straight's defense motions on file in Alexandria call Collins' false imprisonment charge "sheer fantasy."

THESE ARE some of the sworn statements made by three former clients and two parents:

Marcie Sizemore, 17, of Chantilly, Va., was in Straight from December 1980 until last March. She claims she was taken into a bathroom at Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters by "six or seven other girls" during December 1981 after she refused to participate in a group "trap" session.

"The girls," according to Miss Sizemore's statement, "beat me, punched me, placed their fingers in my collar bone and twisted the bones and verbally abused me . . . At other times, Miss Sizemore claims, 'the girls would hold my arms out at my sides, while another girl would run across the room and ram her head against my stomach . . . continuously.'"

During the same session, Miss Sizemore claims she was thrown against a wall, pushed "back and forth" and told she was crazy by the half-dozen Straight clients. Unless she participated in the program, Miss Sizemore claims she was told, she would be institutionalized or taken to a program

where "lesbians would get me."

THE SESSION lasted nine and a half hours, and Miss Sizemore claims that she passed out twice from exhaustion. Each time, "the girls kicked me, pulled at me and made me get to my feet and again continued to subject me to the beating."

Miss Sizemore also claims she was denied allergy shots and treatment for a foot fungus while at Straight. She claims she saw a physician only once during her 14 months in the program.

Penelope Sizemore, Marcie Sizemore's mother, claims that when she admitted Marcie to Straight two years ago, she "was assured of my daughter's physical safety and welfare."

When she withdrew Marcie from Straight's St. Petersburg facility last March and took her to a physician, Mrs. Sizemore claims she found open sores on Marcie's back and arms and a "severe fungus condition on her feet." Marcie's doctor, Mrs. Sizemore claims, told her that Marcie was completely debilitated from her experience at Straight.

Penelope Sizemore, mother of a disaffected ex-Straight client, helped start Straight's Springfield, Va. branch last year. Now she believes that Straight poses 'a serious threat to the health and welfare of the children enrolled in the program.'

Mrs. Sizemore, according to her affidavit, helped start Straight's branch in Springfield, Va. last year by serving as secretary for its organizing committee. Now she believes that Straight poses "a serious threat to the health and welfare of the children enrolled in the program."

NEWTON, IN HIS sworn statement, denies Miss Sizemore's allegations line by line. "During (Miss Sizemore's) 14 months in the program, no abuses occurred."

Leigh Bright, 15, of Springfield, Va. was in Straight from last May until last November. She says that she was kept awake for 80 continuous hours last summer by alternating teams of fellow clients who were ordered by Newton to "marathon" her.

According to her sworn statement, other clients were subjected to marathons "at least once a week."

"They accomplished this by screaming in my face, keeping me on my feet at all times, by poking me, pulling me, mocking me . . ." Miss Bright says in her statement.

During the same marathon, Miss Bright says, she was forced to kneel around a toilet bowl that she had finished using while "the girls tried to force my hands into the bowl to clean out the waste."

MISS BRIGHT SAYS that she was also picked up by "six or seven girls" in the bathroom, held "approximately three feet from the floor" and dropped "face first onto the tile floor approximately 10 times."

Newton himself, according to Miss Bright's statement, once grabbed her by the hair and threw her to the floor before an open group session. Twice, she says, she saw Newton throw other girls to the floor in the same manner.

Miss Bright, who claims to have confessed to the group that she felt like killing herself, says she was forced to wear white slacks and a blue hospital shirt with the word "psychotic" printed on the back.

"This was done to make me feel like a mental patient," she says, adding that the garb was replaced with normal clothing when her mother visited the program.

Miss Bright says she was denied medical treatment for a vaginal infection while at Straight's St. Petersburg branch. One month after being admitted last May, Miss Bright says she suffered "excruciating abdominal pain." Straight staff members took her to a physician but delayed giving her medication for another month, according to her statement.

Leigh Bright's mother Emily Bright, who evaluates drug treatment programs for the U.S. Army, was also a very active volunteer who helped open Straight's Virginia

branch last October. She, too, according to her sworn statement, believes that Straight's practices are "detrimental to the health and welfare of its clients."

Newton's sworn statement also denies Miss Bright's allegations line by line. Though Newton says he did not grab Miss Bright by the hair and throw her to the floor, he says that he did restrain her once when she had become "physically vicious."

"I USED ONLY" recognized restraint techniques, including a grip on the hair, which causes a person to release anything she is holding or biting," Newton says in his statement.

Newton also claims Miss Bright had a history of "severe physical misbehavior" before entering Straight and adds that she hit several girls in the program.

Marathon sessions, according to Newton's statement, consisted of "continuous, verbal, conversation therapy," designed to help "young abusers evaluate (their) behavior and its results and to make changes."

The marathons did not last for days at a time, Newton says. Clients were allowed "a minimum" of four hours of sleep a night.

The policy, he said, was stopped last August, along with the peanut-butter diets.

"We stopped that, not because there was anything wrong with marathons and peanut-butter diets," Newton told the Times, "but because we were having trouble policing them." The sandwiches were given with fruit and fruit juice, Newton added, and "are actually very nutritious."

Former client Luann [redacted] 19, of Sanford was treated at Straight for three months last year. She says she was kept at Straight in St. Petersburg against her will, even after she turned 18 and should have been legally allowed to leave the program on her own.

WHEN SHE RAN away from the program, Miss [redacted] says, her mother and three unidentified clients from Straight — a married couple and their son — forced her into a car parked outside her boyfriend's house in Sanford. She was driven back to St. Petersburg and kept at Straight until her boyfriend contacted police, she says.

"I'm so tired of the same stuff being raked up again, especially when so many issues have been resolved. . . We do not permit physical abuse or harassment. We seek to treat our clients."
— Miller Newton, Straight clinical director

Miss [redacted] says Newton told her that if she told police she had been forced back to Straight against her will "the state would take over the case and within 24 hours and my mother would be arrested for kidnapping."

Newton denies that Miss [redacted] was kept at Straight against her will and says that the family that brought her back to Straight was not associated with the program. He said in an interview that he informed Miss [redacted] that her mother's attorney was afraid that kidnapping charges would be brought against her if Miss [redacted] told police she had been forcibly brought back to Straight.

"I'm so tired of the same stuff being raked up again, especially when so many issues have been resolved," said Newton, during an interview last week. "They're brought up like fresh issues, and they're not."

The basic therapy process (at Straight), like Alcoholics Anonymous, is based on people who have a problem who are recovering (and) helping other people . . . and in doing so helping themselves," Newton says in his statement.

Restraint techniques, such as "holding someone on the floor," were not used for punishment, Newton says. The technique was used "only when clients had become physically violent and threatening to other people."

"IT WAS A METHOD to stop violent conduct until the child's anger drained and the child could be returned to self-control."

"We seek to build self-esteem and not force confrontations," Newton says of Straight in his statement. "We do not permit physical abuse or harassment. We seek to treat our clients."