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Judge unseals 1981 records of lawsuit against Straight Inc.

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CLEARWATER — Records of a lawsuit against Straight Inc., sealed under court order for more than two years, have been opened to the public by a Pinellas-Pasco circuit judge.

The ruling by Circuit Judge Fred Bryson came in response to a motion seeking access to the records by the *St. Petersburg Times*.

Straight, a nationally-known, St. Petersburg-based drug treatment program, was sued in 1979 by Edward and Edythe ██████, whose 13-year-old daughter broke her back trying to leave the program.

STRAIGHT, WHICH has become controversial because of its treatment methods, settled the case out of court in 1981. But the court records and the terms of the settlement were subsequently sealed by court order.

George K. Rahdert, attorney for the *Times*, argued in a motion filed last June that the ██████ case "is currently timely and newsworthy in light of" controversy still surrounding the program. Bryson, who heard the case last September, ruled last month.

The judge ordered the court seal on all the documents lifted except for the terms of the out-of-court settlement.

"We're pleased that, albeit two years after (the case was sealed), the judge has acknowledged the public's right to know," said *Times* Managing Editor Andrew Barnes.

Martin E. Rice, the attorney for Straight, said that he, too, was pleased.

"(Our) position was advanced mostly as a matter of principle . . . and that is the right of parties to settle their suits without the settlement being disclosed."

The ██████ sued Straight for negligence after their daughter Kristina tried to leave the program by jumping from the

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fourth story apartment in Tampa where she and other Straight clients were staying.

ACCORDING TO the records, Ms. ██████ joined Straight in May 1978 on the advice of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. But she disliked the program immediately describing it later as "the worst experience in my life."

"All they did was put me down," Ms. ██████ said in statements filed with the suit. Ms. ██████ claimed that she was confined in locked rooms at Straight for 12-hour periods because she would not involve herself in the program's rigorous group-confrontation treatment therapy.

Requests to leave the program were rejected, Ms. ██████ claimed, even though Florida law requires that all drug treatment programs to be voluntary. Eleven days after joining Straight, Ms. ██████ jumped from an apartment balcony where she was staying and broke two vertebrae in her back.

Straight argued in its defense that if anyone was negligent in the case it was Ms. ██████ whose parents, according to Straight, were also negligent in the way that they "cared for and supervised" their daughter.

Ms. ██████ injury required extensive back surgery and nine weeks of hospital care. The bills totaled more than \$3,400.