

St. Petersburg Times Tues. Nov. 15, 1983

Key executive for Straight Inc. resigns post

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CLEARWATER — Miller Newton, thought by admirers and critics alike to be the guiding hand behind Straight Inc., has resigned from the popular but much criticized St. Petersburg-based drug treatment program.

Newton, former national clinical director of Straight and head of its St. Petersburg facility, submitted his resignation two weeks ago to William D. Oliver, Straight's executive director, and to Mel Sembler, Straight's executive chairman. Newton's wife Ruth Ann, who was associate director of Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters, also resigned.

Both resignations "were reluctantly accepted," Oliver said in a prepared statement released Monday.

"We just decided that it's time," Newton said when reached at home late Monday afternoon. "We're going to do something new in the Northeastern area of the United States."

NEWTON DECLINED to elaborate on his resignation except to say that he and Mrs. Newton will work as "a team" in a nonprofit, family counseling program now being established "in the New York area."

He declined to be more specific because the new program has not yet been incorporated. Even its name has not been decided. But Newton said he and his wife were asked by a group of supporters he would not name to head the program when it begins treating clients.

"It was the time and the season and we decided to accept another thing," Newton said.

The 45-year-old ordained minister was a former clerk of courts in Pasco County and twice an unsuccessful candidate for Congress before joining Straight as an assistant director in 1980. He rose steadily, becoming director of the St. Petersburg program in 1981 and national clinical director for all of Straight's branches in July 1982.

As Newton's influence grew, so did the program's size. Straight opened a second branch in Sarasota in the summer of 1980, two more in Georgia and Ohio in 1981 and a fifth last year in Virginia. Straight claims to have treated more than 3,000 drug abusers and enjoys a success rate of over 60 percent. Last year, Straight announced ambitious plans to open 26 branches nationwide by the end of 1986.

Those plans have now been set back due to mounting criticism over the program's treatment methods.

STRAIGHT'S SUPPORTERS, including parents and former clients, claim that the program works miracles with drug users, turning antisocial and self destructive teen-agers into well adjusted and highly motivated members of society.

But Straight's use of peer pressure and intense group confrontation therapy to change the thinking and behavior of its clients has also attracted critics. They contend the program abuses the rights of its clients and accomplishes little more than brainwashing.

As Straight has grown in size, so has the controversy surrounding its treatment techniques. Since last May, seven lawsuits have been filed against Straight — two in Sarasota, three in Pinellas, one in Georgia and one in Virginia. All seven suits charged the program with mental and physical abuse.

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Last year, Sarasota State Attorney A. Gardner began a year-long investigation into charges of criminal abuse at Straight's Sarasota branch.

Gardner turned over his investigation to the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) last April. The state agency, which is responsible for licensing drug treatment programs, ordered Straight to comply with a list of corrective measures or face losing its license to operate.

Straight complied in June, but the Sarasota branch was closed in July because of declining patient enrollment.

The clinical director responsible for treatment at Straight's branches, Newton has been at the center of the controversy.

THE PROGRAM HAS maintained all that the abuses said to have occurred in its Pensacola and Sarasota branches are not a violation of its policies and are not tolerated. But in December, Gardner released the sworn state-attorney including three from former staff members from the Sarasota branch, who said clients in

Sarasota were routinely held against their will and some who ran away were occasionally captured and brought back. Those who resisted the program were sometimes poked, grabbed by the neck, pulled by the hair, thrown against walls and sat upon by groups of other clients.

Newton on Monday dismissed any speculation that his and his wife's resignations may be related to Straight's troubles.

"My God, you know we've been in controversy one way or another during the four years I've been there," he said. "We were the ones who initiated it (the resignations)," he added.

Straight still plans to open a new branch in Orlando by January. And while the program remains controversial, it also remains popular. The television news program *20/20* aired a laudatory segment about Straight earlier this month featuring an extensive interview with Newton, who by then had already submitted his resignation.

It was partly because of the program's scheduling, Newton said Monday, that Straight waited until Monday to announce that he and his wife were leaving the program.