

Youth sues mother and drug treatment program

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM
and SUSAN DENLEY
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writers

TAMPA — The 17-year-old son of a prominent Clearwater attorney filed a federal civil rights suit Wednesday against his mother and a controversial Pinellas County drug treatment program.

Charging false imprisonment, kidnapping, invasion of privacy, assault and illegal search, the suit stems from an 11-hour period on Sept. 24 when the youth was in the custody of Straight Inc.

THE AGENCY IS a private, nonprofit program that receives some federal funds. It treats youths 12 to 18. Pinellas County judges frequently sentence criminal youth offenders to enroll in the program.

The suit says David [redacted] son of lawyer Jack [redacted] was released from Straight only after a Pinellas County sheriff's deputy was called to enforce a court order obtained by his father.

Drug program employees initially dodged the order, the suit alleges, by spiriting the youth away from the central Pinellas treatment center in a van and assaulting him "into silence when he called for help."

THE YOUNGER [redacted] also alleges that he was subjected to a "strip search" at Straight and forced into disrobing.

Also named as defendants are Loy Gregg, Mrs. [redacted] (the youth's parents are divorced); James Hartz, director of Straight, and program employee Robin Germann.

Hartz declined to comment. Of the other defendants, only Mrs. [redacted] a teacher, could be reached, and she denied each of the suit's allegations.

She said she took her son to Straight because he was "incorrigible" and "a school dropout."

"I visited Straight, and I thought, 'Here's a program that can help my son a lot,'" she said. "I was so impressed by what they were doing."

SHE CITED what she calls "a Christian environment" combined with "reality" therapy at the program. She compared it to a "summer camp."

"A friend since he was 4 years old was in the program and sent me a message saying, 'Mrs. [redacted] please get David in Straight,'" she said. "If this is so bad why would his peer try to get him into it?"

"I thought it was in the best interest of the child to have him in Straight."

But she yielded to the court order when she realized that she did not have her former husband's cooperation.

"Absolutely nothing was done to him there," she said.

[redacted] asks for an injunction against the defendants, a jury trial and both punitive and actual damages.