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Merkle sings at benefit

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TAMPA - With his white shirt unbuttoned to his chest and a cowboy lilt in his voice, Robert Merkle serenaded thousands of rock fans Sunday at a concert to crusade against **drugs**.

The Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate surprised the audience at Lowry Park, where a musical marathon of 13 local groups kept the band shell bopping from noon to 10 p.m. While admission was free, auction sales and part of the profits from concession stands will go to **Straight**, a non-profit **drug** treatment program. Concert officials said they expected to make about \$ 1,500, but they said spreading an anti-**drug** message was more important.

"I know what it takes to go after big **drug** dealers and put them in jail," boasted Merkle, who prosecuted **drug** smuggler Carlos Lehder Rivas as U.S. attorney in Tampa.

Saying he aimed to prove that his commitment to the fight against **drug** abuse was more than mere talk, Merkle picked up an electric guitar and launched into a song whose lyrics he wrote himself: "My heroes have always been lawyers and still are it seems, Sadly in search of and one step in back of themselves and their slow-moving schemes."

He also read a letter from Nancy Reagan's office, saying the first lady was too busy to attend but sent her regards.

Meanwhile, about a dozen young men picketed against **Straight** with signs that read, "We have no use for **Straight** abuse."

The program has been criticized for using harsh disciplinary techniques. Angel Montanez, one of the protesters, said his mother recently pulled him out of **Straight** after 97 days because "everyone at **Straight** is violent."

The 17-year-old said counselors shut him inside with chairs against his door and denied him promised access to phones. He said he gave up crack but doesn't credit the **drug** program for his reform.

Wes Clark, spokesman for **Straight**, denied the center used strong-arm tactics and boasted about its 65 percent success rate. About 1,000 people are in **Straight** nationwide, including 80 in St. Petersburg, he said.

Two dozen Guardian Angels patrolled the park during the concert. Al White, the group's national coordinator, said

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they found 50 people drinking beer at the supposedly alcohol-free, **drug**-free concert by midday.

"We told them to dump it or take a hike," he said. Half of the offenders dumped. Half hiked.

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GRAPHIC: BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, Jim Stem; Robert MERKLE; Mark Pankratz of the band Savoir Faire wails on his saxophone during concert against **drugs** in Lowry Park

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