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Drug program allegedly used coercive tactics to con

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer © 1978, The St. Petersburg Times

Coercive tactics, including threatening a youth with a cocked handgun, have been used to control juvenile clients enrolled in the Straight Inc. drug treatment program, former counselors say.

Some of the tactics may have been illegal. Behind-the-scenes accounts given by former counselors portray Straight as being sharply different from the passive and loving treatment program its leaders contend it is.

TWO FORMER counselors — in sworn statements — say they once stood by as Helen R. Petermann, Straight's program director, repeatedly slapped a small youth and yanked him by the hair in an apparent outburst of temper

"I saw maybe five good smacks," one excounselor says.

On at least two occasions, they say, pro-

gram officials prepared questionable documents to intimidate clients into staying at Straight even though the youths may have had a legal right to leave.

A uniformed St. Petersburg police officer was once enlisted to threaten a juvenile with arrest to scare him into staying at Straight against his will a former counselor says.

Dozens of client treatment reports were deliberately falsified by the counselors. And they say James E. Hartz, Straight's executive director, condoned it.

Another ex-counselor says Hartz — "kind of like, off the record" — encouraged counselors to physically detain clients who tried to run away. The counselors say Hartz never told them that state law forbids holding some juveniles against their will.

"THERE WERE LOADS of times when I had to tackle somebody," a former counselor says.

Straight officials generally deny the allegations.

"I don't feel I have to defend it (the program) because I know what we're doing is good, it's just and I know that we're not out to hurt anyone." Hartz says.

He acknowledges that the program operated for more than a year before he informed counselors that they could not legally detain some clients against their will.

Until state health officials told him of the law last December, he says, "I never heard of it." The law has been in effect since 1972.

Based in a Park Street warehouse just north of St. Petersburg, Straight is a private, non-profit program using peer-pressure behavioral modification techniques on juveniles from 12 to 18.

TWO FORMER Straight staffers recall a peculiar treatment session that they believe had little to do with saving juveniles from the evils of drug abuse.

They say Mrs. Petermann, 56, allegedly demonstrated different positions of sexual intercourse to a group of female clients, some

in their early teens.

Mrs. Petermann was unavailable for comment on any of the allegations. She declined to return several telephone calls from *The St. Petersburg Times*.

Hartz asked that all questions involving Straight be directed to him and said he knows of no such sex discussion

But the subject of sex occasionally comes up during program treatments, he says, and it is "normal" that juveniles have questions.

"Helen's a very uninhibited person," Hartz said. If the session occurred, he said, "it might have been done better in private."

PERHAPS THE MOST serious allegation related by several sources dates back to February 1977, when a member of Straight's governing board — Richard G. Batchelor led a band of juveniles in search of a runaway.

One member of the group carried a gun and — according to a witness' sworn statement — threatened to shoot a youth who was thought to have been aiding the runaway.

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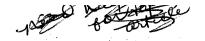
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threatened to shoot a youth who was thought
to have been aiding the runaway.

The band ultimately caught the runaway and wrestled him to the ground. When police arrived to break up the disturbance, no gun was found.

After two telephone conversations last week, Batchelor denied that a gun was used.' During the first conversation he said "I will neither confirm that nor deny it."

Minutes later, after he said he had spoken to Straight director Hartz, Batchelor called back to say "I deny it."

"I did see a piece of pipe and that's what the police were told," he said. Then he said, "No, I'm not sure it was a piece of pipe...the police were told what they (others present) thought was a gun was a piece of pipe.

"I don't believe in guns or violence," he said. "You're finding out things I don't want you to know about people."

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HEALTH OFFICIALS have vestigating Straight since last December, a a series of articles in *The Times* quoted a outh who said he had been beaten while undergoing treatment there.

Investigators found several operational flaws it Straight and reported that some clients may have been illegally held against their will.

State law says a juvenile cannot be involuntaily held in a drug treatment program unless it is by a judge's order.

Some of Straight's 460 clients were ordered here by judges, but most were enrolled by their parents.

Officials with the Florida Department of Iealth and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) issued a general endorsement of Straight in late Ianuary but gave the program 90 days to correct he problems or risk losing its state license.

Investigators say they could not prove any nistreatment charges.

Last week new allegations surfaced when ome Largo area homeowners reported seeing a roung girl try unsuccessfully to run from a straight foster home. The residents also say hat in recent months they have seen hand-uffed teenagers enter the home. Both allegations are being investigated by HRS.

THE FORMER counselors interviewed by *The Times* first took their stories to HRS. But hey were disappointed with the outcome of the nitial HRS investigation, branding it a whitevash.

They agreed to be interviewed for this article on two conditions, that:

- ✓ Their names be withheld because they ear reprisals and think the publicity could hurt heir efforts to find new jobs.
- ✓ They be quoted saying that even with its problems, Straight apparently has helped many uveniles overcome drug abuse and return to heir families with new respect for their parents and themselves.

"I left (Straight) because of the way things vere getting," one former counselor says. "I lidn't want to get in trouble. The program was etting to the point where it was getting so bad hat I felt it was hurting more kids than it was lelping. They (Straight leaders) wouldn't listen nymore."

"We didn't want to go to the newspaper ... ecause we didn't want to give Straight Inc. any ad publicity whatsoever," says another. "We lon't want to close the program down."

ON A RECENT promotional brochure for itraight, Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Judge Jack Dadswell calls it "the most effective rehabilitation program in Florida." Dadswell presides wer juvenile court cases.

Straight asks parents for "donations" of rom \$350 to \$550 per juvenile, although leaders ay no one is turned away because they cannot av.

The program relies heavily on counselors ho themselves have overcome drug problems. As are in their late teens and have no formal raining in drug rehabilitation.

Training is important because some of traight's techniques involve intensive yelling



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sessions that could be potentially harmful for clients if performed improperly, experts say.

Director Hartz, who has a degree in clinical psychology, says he has properly trained each of his staff members.

BUT FORMER counselors interviewed by The Times say Hartz gave them no training.

"We never had an ounce of training," one former staffer says.

"All we had was what we learned in The Seed (the embattled drug program that preceded Straight) and we passed it on to the kids," says another. "They never trained us as far as anything." (The Seed also used peer-pressure treatment techniques, but left Pinellas in 1975 after state officials began questioning its financial operations.)

The former counselors also say that during the months they worked at Straight:

Mrs. Petermann allegedly prepared two questionable documents to scare clients into remaining at Straight. One was a "fake document" signed "from the police department," an excounselor says.

"After he signed it she goes, 'Ah ha! Now we've got you. If you don't stay here now and you run away, we're gonna send you away to Marianna (state juvenile home).' That kept the kid there," says the former counselor.

Mrs. Petermann allegedly threatened at least one other juvenile in the same manner, according to the ex-counselor.

Again, Mrs. Petermann was unavailable for comment.

HARTZ SAYS HE is not aware of any such documents.

"I remember writing down a statement for a boy, that I had him sign," Hartz says. "We had him sign stating that if he didn't (perform properly in the program) this could be given to his probation officer ... but there were no, to my knowledge, fake documents. We just wanted him to make a very firm commitment to this program."

Dozens of client treatment reports were falsified. "You know, you just make it up off the top of your head because we were so understaffed that there (was) no way you could keep those records right," says an ex-counselor.

"That's how we did it, because that's how we

were told to do it," another says.

Hartz says he knows nothing about any falsi fication.

✓ St. Petersburg police officer Ronald K. Hartz — nephew of Straight's director — allegedly threatened to arrest a youth who had repeatedly asked to leave the program.

"The kid freaked out" and agreed to stay at Straight, one former counselor says. "He (officer Hartz) walks in (and tells the client), 'Do you know that we could put you in jail? I'm gonnaput you in jail,' you know, pulling out his handcuffs."

OFFICER HARTZ says, "There's nothing to the story. That's a lie."

Director Hartz says a client once threatened to harm a counselor and officer Hartz "came by, he did go up, he did talk to the kid, he did describe what could happen to him for these offenses." Hartz says his nephew "never threatened to arrest the kid."

✓ The doors were regularly padlocked, but the locks were removed whenever parents or visitors were expected at Straight.

"Doors were locked and bolted, but we didn't hide it," Hartz says.

A client was brought to Straight in handcuffs, and Hartz condoned their use. One former counselor says he was told that the client had been handcuffed to his bed the night before. In a carefully worded statement, Hartz allegedly told the counselor to advise others to continue handcuffing the juvenile. But Hartz told him not to endorse the restraint outright.

"He (Hartz) says, 'My God, if anybody ever got ahold that we handcuff kids to their beds, that we ordered this to happen, we'd be in big trouble, so you make sure that you don't tell a kid (to) handcuff him to the bed,' " says the excounselor.

Hartz says he recalls only a "funny" incident when parents once brought a juvenile to Straight in handcuffs. "Of course, as soon as he came in the building they (the cuffs) were removed."

Older, huskier clients would be used to discipline smaller clients who had misbehaved.

"A lot of times there was physical pressure, but it wasn't by the staff itself — they'd have another kid from the group," an ex-counselor says. "They'd say 'you go with him and if he doesn't scrub the bathroom you make him scrub the bathroom.'"

IF THE CLIENT being punished failed to cooperate, "they'd jump on him or something," says another former counselor.

"That's not the way I see it," Hartz said. "The way I see it is 'Listen, this has been assigned a task to you as a consequence of your behavior. We're going to assist you finishing it.'"

Only once has such a situation "come to first cuffs," says Hartz. What was the outcome? "As I understand it," he explains, "the kid finisher the task."

The ex-counselors say they repeatedly que tioned many of Straight's procedures and hop that HRS would publicly detail what its invegation found. But the full HRS report remonstrained confidential.

"We tried to do everything the right says a former counselor. "It's like we're k ing our heads against the wall, because it that nobody wants to do anything."