

# Jury says Straight *INC.* must pay \$220,000

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ALEXANDRIA, Va. — A federal jury decided Wednesday that Straight Inc. should pay \$220,000 in damages to a college student who was held against his will at the drug treatment program's St. Petersburg branch.

Of the award, \$180,000 is in punitive damages and \$40,000 is to compensate the student, Fred Collins, for the time he was imprisoned.

The jurors agreed quickly on the matter of punitive damages, said juror Louis DeSanti in an interview later, then haggled over the amount to award Collins for compensation.

"There was agreement that we need to give a clear message, that you can't operate with lawlessness and that you need to punish this type of behavior," said DeSanti, who is a retired government employee who specialized in political science. "They (Straight) violated clients' rights constantly. . . . That was pretty clear . . . not only with (Collins) but with a number of witnesses."

Collins, a 20-year-old, lanky, articulate college student, called the decision a "very fair verdict" and a "substantial victory."

**HIS ATTORNEY** Philip J. Hirschkop, a 46-year old civil rights lawyer, also was pleased.

"It (the decision) is commensurate with what they did," Hirschkop said. "They (Straight) have been operating by locking people up for more than seven years."

The jurors' decision, announced in U.S. District Court in Alexandria after less than four hours' deliberation, stunned Straight's attorneys, its program directors and a courtroom full of parents with children in the private, nonprofit program who came to watch the trial.

Straight executive director William Oliver said of the jury's award, "I'm shocked . . . I'm surprised." He added: "We're going to keep on with the fight for the lives of young people. If we've gone too far in fighting for that, we didn't intend to."

While Straight's chief attorney Ronald Goldfarb promised to appeal the decision, about 150 parents, along with Oliver and Straight's clinical director Miller Newton, attended a small rally in support of the program just two blocks from the courthouse.

"WHAT YOU SEE here are a lot of parents who, no matter what you read in the papers or see in the courtroom, still believe that Straight is great," said William M. Burns, a White House policy adviser on drug abuse who has a child in Straight.

Burns introduced a member of the Washington, D.C. Junior League, who, to loud cheers and applause, presented Straight with a \$25,000 contribution.

The issue of adolescent drug use is bigger than the Collins case, clinical director Newton told the crowd afterward:

"It means every time we see a kid from now on we're going to have to be a little scared about what can happen to us as a drug program. . . . The verdict today is really kind of scary. . . .

"But the issue," said Newton, "is the view of the nation about the rights of young people who are out of control. . . . The final issue is fairly clear. . . . Do families have a right to protect family members who are out of control?"

The crowd responded with cheers, applause and a gentle refrain from several of its members:

"Love you, Dr. Newton."

The jury's decision Wednesday followed a one-day hearing Tuesday and closing arguments Wednesday morning. Two weeks ago, the same jury had found that Straight did falsely imprison Collins.

Collins was a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute when he visited Straight's St. Petersburg branch last June to see his brother, a client in the program. He filed suit against Straight last December, claiming that he was forced to join Straight against his will during that visit and that he was imprisoned at its branches in St. Petersburg and Virginia until he ran away last October.

**HIS LAWSUIT**, originally filed as a class action to represent all of Straight's present and future clients, charged Straight with "abusive treatment . . . false imprisonment, assault and intentional infliction of emotional distress."

The class action portion of the suit was thrown out by U.S. District Judge Albert V. Bryan Jr. last January.

While the jury of five men and one woman agreed two weeks ago that Collins was falsely imprisoned at Straight, it threw out his charges of assault and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

At the time, Straight's directors and attorneys minimized the false imprisonment verdict by claiming it was a "technical defeat." All agreed that the jury's award of damages would more accurately reflect whether the jurors really believed Collins' story.

As he did during his closing arguments two weeks ago, Straight's defense attorney Goldfarb skirted the evidence Hirschkop presented against Straight and attacked Collins' credibility as a former drug user and a "con man."

"I think this kid's story you heard yesterday is as credible as a three dollar bill," Goldfarb said. "And that's what you should award him."

Collins testified that Straight had driven a wedge between him and his family because under Straight's written policies, the Collinses and their younger son are forbidden from giving Fred any financial or emotional support.

Collins and Dr. James H. Egan, a Washington, D.C. child psychiatrist, testified that Collins now suffers depression, guilt and low self-esteem because of his experience at Straight.

But Goldfarb belittled the testimony by pointing out that Collins never sought Egan's help until three months after filing his suit against Straight. Collins' failed family relationships were his own fault, Goldfarb argued, because he broke his word to his father and smoked marijuana during part of his first year at college.

Collins' attorney Hirschkop countered as he did two weeks ago — by leading the jury step by step through evidence he compiled showing that Straight has a "pattern and practice" of holding clients against their will. His evidence included testimony from three former clients who said they were imprisoned.

**STRAIGHT**, according to Hirschkop, had been warned repeatedly by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services that such practices were illegal because state law requires that drug treatment clients enter help programs voluntarily and be allowed to leave when they want to.

Yet Straight, said Hirschkop, continues to lock all the doors and windows in the private homes where the clients sleep at night. And clients who didn't cooperate or tried to leave Straight were routinely punished with isolated confinement, restricted diets, sleep deprivation and physical violence, Hirschkop contended.

"It's the same pattern in every case," said Hirschkop. "They didn't care about state law. That's why a young man (Collins) gave up 130 days of his life."

"Liberty is the most precious asset that we have in our society," Hirschkop said. "It can never, never be taken away the way it was taken away at Straight — in open defiance of the law."

Hirschkop urged the jury to award high punitive damages and send a message to Straight saying "not to do it again."