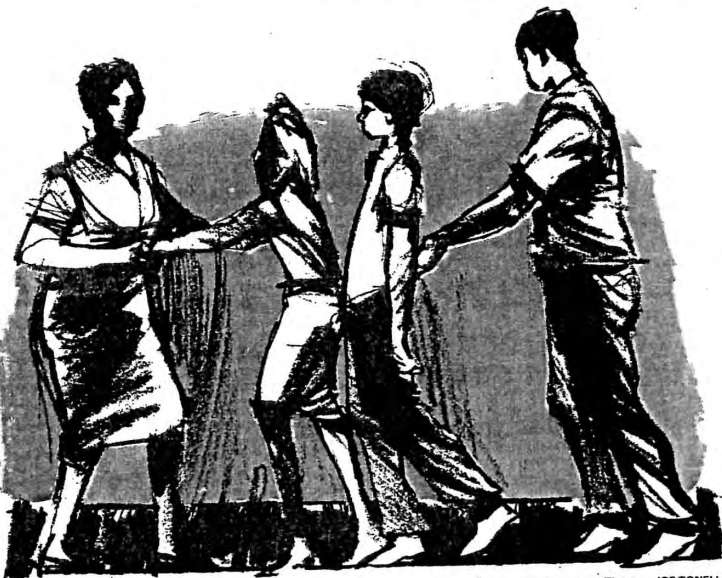


Growing Straight Inc. remains controversial

The teen-age drug-abuse therapy program, say some parents and former clients, is something close to divine salvation; others say it borders on brainwashing

During their first weeks at Straight, boys are held by their belt loops as they are escorted around the premises. Girls are taken by their hands.



St. Petersburg Times — JOE TONELLI

■ *Straight Inc., a controversial drug-abuse treatment program for teen-agers, is approaching its fifth anniversary of operation in Pinellas County. This story, the first of two parts, examines Straight's method of therapy.* ■

By **MILO GEYELIN**
 St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Almost every weekday morning it's the same.

As commuters on the way to work cruise by a squat, sand-colored concrete building at 3001 Gandy Blvd., a chorus of teen-age voices rises from somewhere inside. The voices all sing the same song — a song that, like it or not, will set the tone for the rest of the day:

*I'm here at Straight, feeling great;
 From nine to nine, I'm feeling fine.*

Nobody inside will be going anywhere for a while. Straight Inc., a drug rehabilitation center for teen-agers, will soon be in its sixth year of operation in Pinellas County. With a new branch successfully opened in Saragota last fall, another expected to open in Atlanta this summer and still more being considered in Cincinnati and Washington, D.C., the program is attracting a national following.

But its philosophy — that if peer pressure can get kids

into trouble with drugs, peer pressure can get the "straight" — remains controversial.

STRAIGHT CALLS its therapy "re-aculturation — the process of "relearning the values, rules and behavior of the main culture."

In the opinion of some parents and former clients, the therapy program is something close to divine salvation. Other parents and former clients say it borders on brainwashing.

Straight's therapy is based on the theory that teen-agers who use drugs — most commonly marijuana and alcohol — can't be helped unless they are totally removed from the influences that encourage them to use drugs, says Straight Administrative Director Miller Newton.

Conventional counseling by psychologists or psychiatrists doesn't work with kids on drugs, Newton says, because "you cannot isolate the kid from the peer pressure that has (use of drugs) implicit in it." The way teen-age drug users dress, the way they talk, the music they like, their values — all these carry a message that Straight contends is unconventional, powerful and destructive.

See **STRAIGHT, 6-B**

Straight

As Newton puts it, "The 'do drugs' message is so strong that you just can't isolate the kid from it." At Straight, the approach is to do just that.

Getting 'straight'

Two-agers enter Straight out from their friends and families. They have no rights. Boys are held by their bell bodies as they are escorted around the premises during their first week at the program; girls are taken by their hands. Routine activities are closely controlled. Clients can drink water and go to the bathroom only twice a day, shower at specified times and for specified periods, brush their teeth and comb their hair for only a certain number of strokes and talk only when called upon.

Rights to talk to parents, read books and watch television are taken away, then "earned" back as two-agers pass through five progressive phases of treatment. The first phase involves developing "self," says Newton. It means being "honest about one's self" and "drugs." While two-agers are in this phase of the program, they live with other clients' families until they have earned the right to "rooms home."

IN THE SECOND phase, the two-agers can live at home and commute to the third phase, they can attend school by day and Straight at night and on week ends. The fourth phase stresses developing friendships and the fifth phase, the "sharing stage" — is when the client may become a peer counselor and, ultimately, leave the program.

Clients who are almost "straight" assist about a dozen young junior-senior staff members — all of them former clients who make up the bulk of Straight's staff. There are five full-time professionals on the staff and one clinical psychologist who shares his time between the St. Petersburg and the Sarasota branches. "If you look at the whole process, what do we have in sort of form a repression," says Dr. William Glass, the clinical psychologist. "That is, we go back to about the toddler age and teach totally and about toddler age. The belt long phenomenon is much like what a parent would do with a toddler. The relationship is reciprocal."

The day begins with the Straight sing-along and perhaps a recitation of self-improvement pledges known as "The Seven Steps." Then the two-agers begin the first of three daily group therapy sessions called "raps." In a large, hot auditorium, seated in hard plastic chairs, boys and girls aged 12 to 18 face a staff member and embark on a discussion that begins with broad themes, then narrows down to personal observations.

"ONE OF THE BEST" delivered

Motivation and honesty are encouraged. Suspected dishonesty and unwillingness to participate are attacked. Two former clients interviewed by The St. Petersburg Times said the rap sessions for most clients amounted to little more than "phony" confessions of how many brands were smoked or that you had a job and were doing well. You were supposed to confess all bad stuff, and if you didn't, they figured you were lying."

"To please a counselor or to shut someone up from putting you down, you always had to talk a big, dramatic story," says former client Jeanine [redacted] 14, who ran away from the program last spring after five months there. "Some of the things they trained about involved me, but a lot of it didn't. Every time I tried to talk them about my past, they would sit me down and tell me I was being dishonest."

"PEOPLE would lie through their eyes to get better," recalls former client Michael [redacted] 14, who ran away from the program last October after three months. "If you said things that were unpopular, it was discouraged, like that out of many of my friends were drugs or that you had a job and were doing well. You were supposed to confess all bad stuff, and if you didn't, they figured you were lying."

But other former clients say rap sessions cut close to the bone, forced them to examine themselves and, in the long run, developed their self-confidence to the point where they could play drugs.

Nancy [redacted] who left the program after one and one-half months, says she is sure that "there were some younger kids in the program who did that [lied to peer staff]," but says that it was drug talk and about what they had just been yanked from. "Outside, you get just as much pressure from peers to do things wrong. I don't see what's wrong with using peer pressure to encourage someone to do something right."

Those who want to advance through the program must stand before the group, at specially scheduled rap times a week and announce that they feel ready to progress.

Staff writer Milo Geyelin spent several weeks interviewing former Straight clients, parents, staff members and numerous authorities in law enforcement, psychiatry and drug abuse to compile this report. Recently, he also spent a day at Straight observing the treatment program. Geyelin, 26, has been on the staff of The St. Petersburg Times since October 1979. He was born in Washington, D.C. and attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he majored in history and political science and graduated with distinction in December 1976.

Since joining The Times, Geyelin has worked as a general assignment reporter and covered city government and police.

The request is discussed by the group, which then votes on it. A decision is made later the same day by the senior and executive staff, which rarely goes against the group vote. The decision is announced before the evening's "Open meeting."

A family affair

At the open meetings, which parents are required to attend on a regular basis, two-agers new to the program stand up before a packed audience and confess their drug use and what it did to them: the stealing, the seas, the hostility toward their parents and society. They talk about their feelings — mostly guilt — and how they will better themselves at Straight.

Family contact is limited to the tightly controlled open meetings until the two-ager reaches the second phase and is allowed to return home. The two-agers, boys separate from girls, sit on one side of the auditorium. Before the parents are led in, staff members call them to sit up straight, talk to their shirts, look rest and smile. As the parents are being led through the back of the auditorium, the children are singing another Straight sing-along.

I am straight, I can do anything... anything I am strong, I am invincible... anything I am straight, I can do anything... anything I am strong, I am invincible...

The parents sit along with the song ends. Between them and their children sit fast away, two two-ager staff members sit on stools. The meeting is planned so an onlooker may look directly across at his child. Eye contact between parents and children is forbidden.

After the two-ager confessions, a collection is taken from the parents.

THEN THE PARENTS speak to their children by microphone. Many simply say, "I love you." Talk to you and admonish their children to work harder at getting "straight." Some talk about their own feelings and others say flatly that their children are unrepentant and honest until they are "straight."

All through the open meeting, the names of those two-agers who have reached "second phase" and can go home for the duration of Straight's program are announced. Some, like the names of those who jump up, scramble across the stage, hug their parents and cry, and others who hug and leap up and arms into a tearful embrace. The family hugs are the more powerful by the chilling confessions which began the meeting.

At the meeting's close, parents, clients and staff members join hands and sing a prayer. Then parents turn to their seated next to them and embrace their children. The message is usually understated and reverent.

tion PAR (Parent Awareness and Responsibility) because that program does not take children away from their families.

"If the PAR program is a shorter program and a little more normal," Page says. A stay at Straight can include more than a jail sentence for the original drug-related offenses that bring the two-ager into care, by length of time and degree of involvement you'll find far consistency control," Page says.

"Straight is highly intensive, and involves the active family, more time and more money (than PAR)... The kids go under a lot of pressure, and I'm not the one to put them under that pressure."

There was a time when Judge Robert Michael ordered two-agers into Straight as a matter of normal disposition, he says. But now he is reluctant to order juveniles into the program, even for drug offenses.

"I'M SURE THAT when parents get desperate, they welcome any program that will help their kids. But for those who don't need it (the kind of intense program Straight offers), I don't think you should be putting them just to put them in the program," he said. Judge Michael also sends some of his juvenile drug offenders to PAR. He has not ordered a child into Straight in almost a year.

Controversy remains

Troubles at Straight first surfaced in December 1977, after six directors resigned to protest management and treatment conditions at the program. One director accused the nonprofit corporation of "trick, care, dishonesty and abuse." The complaints, which centered around handling of money and mistreatment of patients, were met with those lodged against Straight's president, even for drug offenses.

The need was tabulated in October 1976 amid reports that the post-pressure tactics subjected two-agers to intense mental and physical abuse. The report had linked treatment methods used by The Seal to highly refined treatment techniques employed by the Navy during the 1960s.

Most of Straight's directors, its board of directors and staff members came directly from The Seal. But Straight, he supporters said at the time, was going to be different. The philosophy at Straight's rap sessions would be on creating a positive environment of "trust, care, honesty and sincerity."

In February 1978, reports arose alleging coercive tactics at the program. Former associates said that a youth was threatened with a coated handgun and others were forcibly detained or threatened with false accusations.

Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) found that Straight was not following state rules on client treatment and record-keeping.

The HRS report indicated that several clients picked up for interviews said high-level staff members threatened them with court orders which they were told would either force them into the Straight program or a mental institution if they did not sign themselves in voluntarily. HRS also said its clients interviewed in voluntary process through which they could leave the program. Clients told HRS officials that doors and windows at the homes they live through the initial phase were locked from the outside so they could not leave. Personal files such as medical histories, treatment plans and psycho-social evaluations were found to be incomplete or inadequately maintained. Straight was unable to document a training program for its staff.

CONTACTED AFTER the HRS report was released, Straight Executive Director Harts said he felt "there are some inaccuracies" in the report but declined to answer its specifics. "We fully wish to comply with state regulations and that is our intent," he said. (A more recent HRS inspection of Straight was conducted in June and Straight's license was renewed for one year. But HRS officials declined to discuss the specific evaluations until a written report is completed.)

Despite its difficulties, Straight has attracted powerful national and local support. Robert E. Doherty, the founding director of the National Institute for Drug Abuse, last December addressed a banquet of Straight supporters in Tampa and called Straight one of the best drug-abuse treatment centers in the country.

The program enjoys strong local support from such powerful names as shopping center developer Mal Seaborn, former radio and television station owner Sam G. Russell and Florida developer Joseph Zeppala. All three sit on the program's board of directors. Nonetheless, former clients continue to complain bitterly about the way Straight and its staff have run its program. And Straight's definition of drug abuse appears to be highly subjective, yet more dogmatic, than that used by others in the field.

When is drug use drug abuse?

At Straight, any use of drugs is considered to be a problem. "If you talked to us about not taking kids who use recreational drugs because it's not dangerous, I would probably go through the roof as an individual or a professional because I would not want that attributed to me or the program," says Newton.

"I can only give you my opinion," says Harts. "The program doesn't have a written policy on who is a drug abuser. To me, it's like pregnancy: Either you 'is' or you 'ain't'."

"A 14-year-old who did alcohol and pot and never got arrested, never skipped school — that person in our opinion needs to work through his or her relationship to that drug just as much as the person who is 16 and who was out on a drug (breaking and entering), ripping off and so on and so forth."

TRYING TO DEFINE drug abuse, says Harts, who has a bachelor's degree and master's degree in psychology, is like trying to define schizophrenia. You can't say it's different between two and three. It's a subjective type of judgment based upon the chemical dependency model we use here... You learn to identify the problem, but... it's not just going out and reading a thermometer... the answer is a combination of experience, your knowledge base and the fact that we have some literature to review on. And our opinions."

The "chemical dependency model" used at Straight was first adapted by Straight's administrative director, Newton, from a study on adult alcoholism. It lumps all drug use and its effects into one category — a progressive and ultimately fatal "disease of the feelings."

Before joining Straight, Newton, an ordained minister who graduated from Princeton University, was clerk of the Circuit Court in Palm County, an unsuccessful 1976 candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives and former director of the Florida Alcohol Condition Clinic.

"OUR POSITION is this," says Newton. "Whether we take a kid into the program or not is determined in our judgment by whether the child and the family can handle stopping the drug) use themselves, or whether they need the help of an intensive, therapeutic program to isolate the kid from the peer influences... the availability of drug."

That determination is made on the basis of reports from parents, school officials, police records, the reputation a two-ager may have with friends and relatives already in the program and the results of a thorough interview known as "rap" in which two-agers are usually taken by their parents.

In the intake procedure that some former clients criticize most severely, they say that for hours, they were grilled, told they were dishonest, worthless and threatened with moral orders that would put them in the program and keep them there.

Eventually, they said, they believed it. So they signed themselves in.

NEWTON DENIES any threats of court orders and scolds at the possibility that some of Straight's clients may have been bullied into the program. "Nobody who has good social skills and the ability to communicate would belly talk to you about your behavior for four, six or eight hours... We've dealt with 1,000 kids here now, so we've put together a very coherent pattern that is fail-safe."

Other mental health professionals and experts involved in testing drug abusers agree that Straight's use of a child to a program like Straight depends on what you consider a drug problem to be. Most distinguish be-

tween Straight and the police department to go work as a juvenile specialist at HRS. He is now police chief of St. Petersburg Beach.

OPERATION PAR also makes a distinction between casual use of drugs and abuse, and marijuana and some of those drugs, says Associate Executive Director Arnold Andrews. For a two-ager to be admitted to PAR, problems with police, one's family or school must be directly related to drug use.

At PAR, which operates as an outpatient counseling clinic where clients and families come for scheduled appointments and leave, treatment is handled by staff members who have at least two years of college training in counseling.

"They (Straight) deal with white middle- and upper-middle-class kids," says Andrews. "PAR kids are more lower-class, inner-city."

"People start taking drugs for all different sorts of reasons," says Dr. Anthony Reading, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of South Florida. "There is some correlation to underlying, growing emotional problems."

Growing up and being a two-ager involves all sorts of complex issues — stress, loneliness, anxiety, says Dr. Reading. "It's reasonable to assume that people in general don't get involved or overwhelmed with drugs unless they have some kind of emotional problem."

"PROGRAMS LIKE Straight appeal to parents because they don't have that same responsibility for their children's (drug) problem. Parents can get over-attached to the program because of the fact a parent has a personal saying, 'You've been a bad person.'"

In other words, Straight appeals to parents because its philosophy says that family problems stem from the drug use — not the other way around.

"We need to understand the drug use as a disease initiated by personal choice in response to peer pressure," says Newton in an unpublished treatise on drug abuse. "They (the parents) did not cause their child to use drugs."

The truth is, Dr. Reading adds, "that in dealing with two-agers, other two-agers can be very, very effective in changing their behavior... Peer pressure can be very supportive in getting them out of changing their lives."

Parents whose children have had successful experience with Straight agree.

"STRAIGHT IS the only drug program available... the services it does for the price," says Charles [redacted] whose son Winston entered the program when he was 16 and is now training to become a staff member. "The price is cheap. You don't get that kind of cooperation unless you get people who really want to help themselves and their kids... Straight is good for everybody. Straight only works if the family wants it to work."

Says another parent: "It's not a perfect program, but it's the best game in town. You can say what you want about it, but it does work."

Next: Straight's critics and supporters recall their experiences with the program.

Who gets straight?

Since September 1976, when Straight opened, about 1,800 two-agers have been enrolled. Roughly 800 have completed the program and only 300 of those — less than a fifth — have stayed completely away from drugs, Newton says.

Most of the two-agers in the program are referred there by parents who already have children in the program or know others who do, says Newton. Some have been referred there by school officials, police and, in the past, the juvenile court.

But during the past two years, the Pinellas-Pasco Juvenile Court has virtually stopped referring youthful drug offenders to the Straight program. And judges say they never send them there merely at the request of parents.

"ALMOST NEVER do we court-order them into the program," says Judge Jack Page. Page says he hasn't ordered a juvenile into Straight since reports surfaced about three years ago that Straight was keeping clients against their will. Though Page thinks the program has been very successful with some clients, he chooses Oper-

