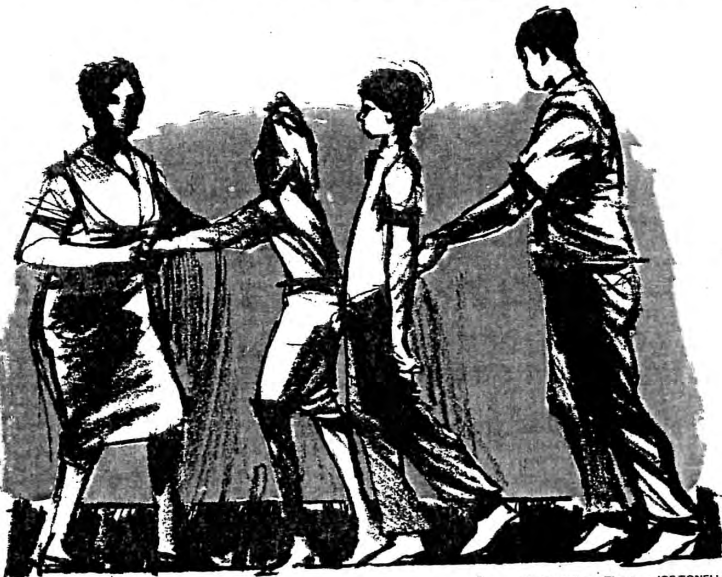


# Growing Straight Inc. remains controversial

**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."

## 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, and 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, where they 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 counselors and 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 we do here is sort of a pure re-education," says Dr. William Glass, the clinical psychologist. "That is, we go back to about the toddler age and teach totally new and different behavior. The last long phenomenon is much like what a parent would do with a toddler. The relationship is personal observations."

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 discussions that begin with broad themes, then narrow down to personal observations.

## "ONE OF THE BEST" delinquents

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 my friends were drug users 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 Hines, who left the program after a year and one month, says she is sure that "there were some younger kids in the program who did (that to pre-empt)" but says that it was drug that she and others had had just been yanked from. "Outside, you get just as they had pressure from parents 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.

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 the 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 and girls, sit on one side of the auditorium. Before the parents are led in, staff members tell them to sit up straight, talk in their shirts, look neat 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..."

The parents applaud when the song ends. Between them and their children sit fast eyes, two two-ager staff members sit on stools. The meeting is planned so an outsider may look directly across at his child. Eye contact between parents 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 us about your feelings. Tell us how you feel about your work here at Straight." Some talk about their own pain and sadness and others say flatly that their children are wonderful 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 are the same, some change. Some are promoted to his or her position, some to the other side of the auditorium and some are promoted into a useful embrace. The family hugs and leaps up to a tearful embrace. The family hugs and leaps up to a tearful embrace. The family hugs and leaps up to a tearful embrace.

At the meeting's close, parents, clients and staff members join hands and sing a prayer. Then parents turn to their seated next to and embrace their children.

The message is carefully orchestrated and rehearsed.

The active program takes at least six months to complete, Newton says. The average stay is 10 to 11 months, though some clients have stayed in the program as long as two years. The cost, Straight says, ranges from \$700 to \$1,700 for the two-ager program, depending upon a family's ability to pay, plus \$55 per month for food — less than a family would make up 70 percent of Straight's \$442,000 annual budget. The rest comes from donations (such as those made at the open meetings), says Straight Executive Director James Hartz. Straight will not turn away clients in need of help, no matter what their financial status, Hartz says.

But no one goes to Straight for free. "I really don't know how many poor clients there are at Straight," Hartz says. "My philosophy is very simple: If you don't pay for something, that's about how much you value it."

Almost all the clients at Straight are white.

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-

tion PAR (Parental 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 court, but length of time and degree of involvement will find for continuity 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 there 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 filed in those lodged against Straight's president, the board.

The board was disbanded in October 1978 amid reports that its past-pressure tactics subjected two-agers to intense mental and physical abuse. The board report had listed treatment methods used by the Straight to highly refined treatment techniques employed by the Navy's Caserma during the 1960's.

Most of Straight's clients, its board of directors and staff members came directly from the Straight. But Straight, its 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."

But in February 1978, reports arose alleging coercive tactics at the program. Former associates said that a youth was threatened with a coxed 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 clients interviewed during its stay process through which they could leave the program.

Clients told HRS officials that doors and windows at the homes they live through the night 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. "We fully wish to comply with documented a training program for its staff."

CONTACTED AFTER the HRS report was released, Straight Executive Director Hartz said he felt "there are some inaccuracies" in the report but declined to answer any questions. "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. Donors include the founder-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 Seibert, former radio and television station owner Sam O. 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 other drug abuse programs. 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 Hartz. "The program does not 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 Hartz, who has a bachelor's degree and master's degree in psychology. "It's 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 Pasco 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 delinquent, worthless, being and threatened with much worse than would put them in the program and keep them there."

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

NEWTON DENIES any threats of court orders and scoffs at the possibility that some of Straight's clients may have been bullied into the program. "Nobody who has good self-esteem would let himself be bullied. Nobody but a baby talks to you about your behavior for four, six, or eight hours... We've spent with 1,800 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-

between a child who is 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 serious responsibility for those 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 at all different rates of speed," 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 a history of emotional problems."

"PROGRAMS LIKE Straight appeal to parents because they don't want to take 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, parents are afraid because if 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. It's not a disease in the sense that you can't change it. Parents who children have had successful experience with Straight agree."

"STRAIGHT IS the only drug program around... the services it does for the price," says Charles Newton, whose son Winston was in the program when he was a child 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 experience with the program.



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.