

Straight Inc. settles with two ex-clients to avoid court action

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CLEARWATER — Two Central Florida women who say that they were kidnapped by Straight Inc., driven to the drug treatment program's St. Petersburg headquarters and imprisoned there, have agreed to accept financial settlements in return for dropping future court action.

Sanford attorney William A. Leffler, representing Luann [redacted] of Sanford and Hope [redacted] of Longwood, said Wednesday that the settlements were "handsome" and that both his clients "are very happy." But the terms of the agreement prevent him or his clients from discussing how much Straight agreed to pay, Leffler added.

Straight executive director William D. Oliver also declined to reveal the amount of the settlement Wednesday but said that Straight, too, is pleased with the terms.

"I'm glad we've worked it out," said Oliver. "Juries," he added, "are a roll of the dice."

LAST MAY, a federal jury ordered Straight to pay \$220,000 in damages to a Virginia college student who was imprisoned by Straight for more than four months last year, both at Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters and at its Virginia branch. Of the amount, \$40,000 was to compensate the former client, Fred Collins Jr., and \$180,000 was to punish Straight.

Both Miss [redacted] and Miss [redacted] testified against Straight and its treatment methods at that trial. Miss [redacted] filed suit last May seeking more than \$210,000 in damages against both Straight and its clinical director Miller Newton. Miss [redacted] had hired Leffler but had not filed a suit when the settlement was reached Monday.

Miss [redacted] 19, was a trainee with the Seminole County Sheriff's Department and a part-time waitress last February when her parents and two men abducted her from a gas station in Longwood, she says. She was driven more than 70 miles to Straight and held there against her will for two days, according to her suit and a sworn statement she signed in April.

WHEN SHE ARRIVED, Miss [redacted] claims, she was kept in a room by Straight clients, and when she tried to leave, she was grabbed and the door was blocked.

Later, when she complained to clinical director Newton that her legal rights were being violated, Miss [redacted] says that Newton "turned around, like he was going to walk (out of the interview room) . . . and then he slammed the door

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really hard and . . . said that he didn't give a damn about my legal rights, or words to that effect . . .

"He just said . . . that I was going to have to stay there and (that) you could tell by looking in my eyes that I had smoked pot within 120 days."

Miss [REDACTED] claims she told Straight staff members that she did not take drugs but that Newton threatened to force her into Straight with a court order, refused to let her make a phone call and told her she could leave only after joining the program voluntarily for 14 days.

When Miss [REDACTED] agreed, she was strip-searched, intimidated and denied aspirin because it is a "drug," she says in her statement. During the two days Miss [REDACTED] was at Straight, she saw two clients who asked to leave the program poked, pushed and shoved by groups of other Straight clients, according to her statement.

MISS [REDACTED] WAS released from Straight after the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services intervened. The state agency is responsible for monitoring drug abuse programs to insure that they comply with state law.

Miss [REDACTED], who ran away from Straight in April 1982 after six months, claims that she was abducted four days later by her mother and three other other persons associated with the program.

According to a sworn statement Miss [REDACTED] signed last December, clients who tried to leave Straight while she was there were routinely tackled and sat on by groups of half a dozen other Straight clients.

After running away from Straight, Miss [REDACTED] says that she was staying at her boyfriend's house in Sanford when her mother, two men and another woman abducted her. According to her statement, Miss [REDACTED] was forced into the back seat of her mother's car and driven more than 120 miles to a Straight staff member's house in St. Petersburg.

"I REPEATED OVER and over again — I was screaming; I was hysterical — that I did not want to go back, that this was totally ridiculous and (that) what they were doing was against the law," Miss [REDACTED] says in her statement. "And they continued to say that they were taking me back because it was what was needed to be done."

Miss [REDACTED] was released the following day after her boyfriend contacted police about pressing kidnapping charges against Miss [REDACTED] mother.

According to her statement, clinical director Newton told Miss [REDACTED] to tell police that she came back to Straight voluntarily or else "the state would take over the case and within 24 hours my mother would be put in jail for kidnapping." Miss [REDACTED] left the program later that night with her grandmother.

Newton, a 44-year-old minister and former clerk of Pasco County courts, denied Miss [REDACTED] accusations Wednesday, calling her a "pathological liar" who has "real drinking problems."

"The girl has a history of pathological lying," Newton said. "The girl is just playing scapegoat kinds of games." Newton said that he spent a total of "5 to 10" minutes with Miss [REDACTED] when she was being interviewed by Straight staff members and that she never asked to use a phone.

As for Miss [REDACTED], Newton said that he only advised her of her mother's precarious legal position.

"IF THE GIRL, in fact, returned voluntarily, then there would be no problem," Newton said, recounting the incident.

Newton said he met with Straight's attorneys several weeks ago to discuss his involvement in the [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] cases. Asked why the program agreed to settle the complaints out of court if they lacked substance, Newton said, "I have absolutely no idea."

Executive director Oliver said Wednesday that the decision was "primarily economics."

"In any issue or disagreement, you look at the cost of taking the thing to court and the cost of settlement," Oliver said. Settlement was the cheaper of the two alternatives, particularly since Straight's insurance company will pay the entire cost.

Had Straight lost the cases in court, the program would have had to pay all punitive damages, Oliver said.

Oliver said that potential had publicity from the trial