

Sarasota boy, 14, charges Straight^{INC} with torture, files \$1.1-million suit

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SARASOTA — A boy sent to a controversial drug-rehabilitation center filed a \$1.1-million suit Tuesday charging he was “physically tortured” and deprived of bathroom privileges during an involuntary six-month stay.

The suit by Benson Williams, 14, of Sarasota said the “torture” during his 1981 stay at the Sarasota branch of Straight Inc. included “atrocities including beatings, being hung by his underpants to a bedpost, carried about by his hair, mental and physical torture . . . (and) deprivation of medical attention, psychiatric guidance and academic schooling.”

The suit, filed by Williams’ mother on his behalf in Sarasota County Circuit Court, claims the child had to disrobe in front of girls who also were “imprisoned” at drug

therapy center, and that the girls beat him “at the instruction and encouragement of Straight employees.”

WILLIAMS WAS 12 when he was sent to Straight in 1981.

The St. Petersburg-based Straight’s Sarasota branch temporarily suspended operation July 20 because of community backlash.

The suit says the boy also was denied regular visits to the bathroom as part of the treatment and “as a result of the above suffered permanent physical and psychological damage.”

Sarasota lawyer Larry Byrd said because the boy was denied regular bathroom visits, he may have permanent bladder problems.

The suit asked for \$200,000 compensatory damage for false imprisonment and \$500,000 in punitive damages. It

also requests \$100,000 in compensatory damages and \$300,000 in punitive damages for alleged “unlawful and malicious . . . numerous acts of physical battery against his will.”

BYRD SAID THE boy’s 17-year old brother also was enrolled in Straight Inc. and is considering a similar suit.

Straight executive director Bill Oliver refused comment Tuesday, saying he had not seen the lawsuit.

Earlier this year, an Alexandria, Va. jury awarded \$220,000 to a man who said he was falsely imprisoned in Straight facilities in Alexandria and Florida.

He had sued for \$750,000 charging he was mentally and physically abused and falsely imprisoned. The jury rejected the abuse charges. But because the man was an adult, the

jury said, he could not be kept at the treatment center without his consent. He had escaped several times during his stay but was brought back.

Straight opened in Sarasota in November 1980 before closing its doors July 20 of this year.

STRAIGHT’S SARASOTA branch was under investigation by the Sarasota State Attorney’s office for more than a year because of charges that clients there were being abused and held against their will.

State Attorney James A. Gardner took more than two dozen sworn statements, but decided last month not to file criminal charges. Gardner said he plans to make the statements public.

— Times staff writer Milo Geyelin contributed to this report.