

Is going Straight for everyone?

[CITY Edition]

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There is no question that the teen-agers at Straight Inc. live in a tightly controlled world.

It's the results that people disagree about.

The first thing you notice at Straight's facility in Pinellas County, the first of what is now a nationwide program, is that the kids dress a lot alike.

Neat, clean jeans. Shirts tucked in. No jewelry or makeup.

The boys have short hair, and the girls' hair must be pulled back and secured. The eyes can't be hidden.

They talk a lot alike, too - not the talk of the street or the school, but open talk about their emotions, their anger, what they want from their parents and their friends.

Clearly, something happens to them here.

But not, at least not at first, by their own choosing.

They are brought by parents who believe they have a drug or alcohol dependency. Almost none of them wants to be here initially.

They are taken from their homes, for a while, to live with "host families" that have a son or daughter further along in the program.

Clothing and other articles brought in from outside are searched carefully.

A handful of teens, diagnosed as needing them, receive psychotropic drugs.

A teen-ager in Straight undergoes a program of several months, maybe a year or more, consisting of five "phases" of varying length, overseen by counselors and lay assistants.

They are supposed to recognize their need for treatment, change their relationships with their family, go back to their schools or jobs, learn to lead a drug-free social life.

The main thing is, they are confronted. They are confronted by the staff, and soon they are confronted by others in the program, who urge them - sometimes gently, sometimes with more insistence - to join in.

Their families are confronted, too. It's not like dropping off your car at the mechanic and picking it up later. Parents must come twice a week; sometimes they are just as much the target of the program as their children.

If parents miss a session, they receive a polite but firm telephone call. If they miss several, they and their child may have to leave.

A lot of people, including our last two U.S. presidents, praise Straight as a model for saving young people.

Some people do not.

Straight gets a lot of bad publicity, most of it - but not all - dating from the early 1980s. One patient who claimed he was falsely detained at a Straight center won a \$220,000 lawsuit; another, \$720,000.

In fact, fighting Straight has become a full-time job for some former clients. There's a group called the National Support Group for Victims of Straight Inc.

Recently Straight was in the news for suing at least 80 families in Pinellas County for not paying fully for their children's treatment.

Straight, a non-profit company, says it's only trying to get what it's due. Straight says its fee for a stay of 9 to 12 months is about \$14,000, compared to \$1,000 or more a day in some private psychiatric hospitals.

Straight's leaders say that some of the complaints from the past are valid, but blame previous management, from an era before the program won national accreditation.

If you go and watch - and Straight says the public is welcome - you'll see a group of kids who talk to each other in a way that most don't. They certainly seem to be making an effort, a lot more than the kids you see moving through, say, the juvenile court system.

On the other hand, the pressure to conform and the enforced cheerfulness are vaguely unnerving.

You wonder whether Straight is for everyone, and whether some of those teens and parents with the bad experiences just should not have been there.

You wonder how parents who are making a decision about Straight are supposed to tell.

Does everyone heal the same way? Once they have broken their drug or alcohol dependency, is there anything automatically wrong with being, say, withdrawn, even anti-social? Weren't a lot of the geniuses in our history not exactly "normal" people?

None of us present a perfectly average, perfectly smooth front to the outside world. We all have plenty of bumps, good and bad.

It takes a deft touch to grind away at the bad, while leaving the good intact.

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