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This is the building where Straight Inc. operates.

Staff Photo

Straight Inc.

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Staff Writer

The names of many of the drugs would twist the tongue of a speech therapist, but the teenagers mouthed them with precision.

Strange terms like Toluene, Ephedrine, Psylocybin, THC and PCP and more common ones like cocaine, opium, heroin, hashish, hash oil, pot and alcohol fell from their lips as easily as if they'd been reciting the alphabet.

They said they had used all those drugs, that they had shot them into their veins, inhaled them into their lungs, sucked them up their nostrils. Until they were either

they can be very valuable tool." He emphasized that everyone encounters forms of behavior modification at his job, in his marriage and other stages of his life.

Each teenager goes through three phases. In the first he is separated from school and his family to live with another family that usually has children that have been through The Seed. A client is allowed to return to his home in the second phase of Straight. He returns to school in the third phase considered "critical" by Hartz because of the temptations there to revert to his old way of life and rejoin his old friends. Finally, the teenager is slowly eased out of the program, but encouraged to volunteer his services to help "newcomers."

Youths On Drugs Say It Works

up such sessions. Until they were either coaxed, cajoled or court-ordered into Straight Inc., the area's newest drug program.

More than 20 youths confessed kicking drug habits, some after less than a week in Straight, during an open meeting with their parents last Monday.

The program may sound familiar to most area residents. Its behavior modification techniques were used by The Seed, the private drug rehabilitation program that closed last October after three stormy years in St. Petersburg.

In fact, most of Straight's creators, board of directors and staff members are alumni of The Seed. But they say they've learned their lesson from the defunct drug program and won't make the same mistakes that sowed distrust in The Seed.

"Most of us involved feel that The Seed did this community a lot of good," said Dr. Leon Sellers, the local veterinarian who founded Straight. "But in order for it to work we must have community acceptance and involvement."

"To me the biggest problem in this community is our lost youth. The drug problem may not be as obvious as it was three years ago, but that doesn't mean it's gone away," he added.

Sellers hired a 27-year-old clinical psychologist, Jim Hartz, to direct the program and set up shop in a 2-story building (above) donated by lumber company operator Ted Anderson at 700 43rd St. S. The Law Enforcement Administration awarded the program a \$47,000 grant. About \$15,000 worth of labor was contributed by AFL-CIO members to get the building in shape.

The program began accepting its first clients about a month ago and now has more than 20. They are problem teens from 12 to 18 years old referred to the program

his services to help "newcomers."

The whole routine can last anywhere from two to eight months depending on how quickly a teenager decides to accept the Straight philosophy. A minimum contribution of \$350 per child is requested from parents, but Hartz said no one will be turned away from the program who can't afford it.

Hartz said he had little input in developing Straight's program and techniques. "The board of directors did that. What you see here is a lot of the good feelings from the former program without the things they didn't like," he said.

The most apparent difference from The Seed is a more relaxed attitude toward the media at Straight. Seed Director Art Barker surrounded his building with staff members to keep teenagers in and the public and press out. He did not permit his employees to talk to newspaper reporters and rarely gave interviews himself.

"It's quite a change from The Seed," said Carolyn Hensop, a Straight volunteer whose daughter went through the former program. "The change is for the better, 100 per cent better."

At Straight, some of the secrecy has been eliminated. Though the daily rap sessions are closed, the building and Hartz's door is open. Barker, the primary target of Seed critics, is in no way connected with Straight, according to Hartz.

There are no guards surrounding Straight now, although Hartz said people with walkie-talkies may be stationed outside if the program grows to its target size of about 200 clients "mainly to give directions and help parking."

In another of the significant differences from The Seed, visitors and the press are permitted to attend the open meetings — encounter sessions between the teens and

12 to 18 years old referred to the program by the Division of Youth Services, Social and Economic Services or the courts.

Each attends closed rap sessions from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day except Sunday when the session lasts from 2 to 8 p.m. a rigorous total of at least 66 hours each week.

Shopping center developer Mel Sembler, another board member, emphasized, "It's not meant to be a country club."

Hartz said what transpires during the lengthy sessions is "extremely confidential." Visitors are not permitted unless they are from state or county agencies that oversee such programs.

Except for Hartz who has a masters degree in psychology, the eight paid staff members who run the groups are "para-professionals." That means they were involved in The Seed, but have no other experience except for Hartz's tutelage.

"The emphasis here is on kids helping kids so our staff members are from 18 to 20 years old. You don't find many people that age with a degree. Many are taking courses at JC (St. Petersburg Junior College,)" Hartz said.

Unlike The Seed in which teenagers were often verbally abused by their peers and staff members, Hartz said the emphasis is on the positive in Straight's rap sessions. "We try to create an environment of trust, care, honesty and sincerity. We try to provide a proper environment for change and allow each person to progress at his own rate."

The clean-cut young program director readily admitted the technique is a form of "behavior modification" — a controversial concept equated with brainwashing by some critics. But he noted, "The principles of Skinnerian psychology are very sound. They can be abused but used professionally

encounter sessions between the teens and their parents held each Monday and Friday in which the results of the long rap sessions burst forth, often in emotional exchanges.

Each boy then stood up gave his first name and age, recited a long list of drugs that he said he had been taking, said he was through with drugs and loved his parents.

One 18-year-old girl and a 21-year-old man said they were "oldcomers" who had been straight ever since going through The Seed. The attractive, blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl said she had attempted suicide before entering the program downing 36 30-milligram sleeping pills and hovering near death for several hours. Her mother, among the parents in the audience, confirmed the story and said, "My life stopped when a doctor told me how serious it was." Both tearfully admitted a new found love for each other and happiness since going through The Seed program.

Most parents told their kids they missed them, they realized they had made some mistakes as parents and that they wanted their child to return home as soon as they felt "they were ready to return."

"When you left, you left a great void in our life," one man told his son. "I'm going to try to treat you more like a son from now on and act more like a father."

The man's eyes began watering and his son cried with a smile on his face.

"Don't worry about the tears son. I was about your age the last time I cried. I really lost something then. I told myself I was going to be a man and men don't cry. It's not true."

Everyone rose, held hands and recited The Lord's Prayer to close the session. Then a cookie jar was passed around and stuffed with money by the parents.