



AP Laserphoto

First Lady Nancy Reagan, on a two-day trip, talks with fifth graders in Pinellas Park, Fla. taking part in a drug prevention program called 'Alpha.' She

also met with drug-prone adolescents and their parents in a treatment program called Straight Inc.

Youths pour out stories of drug use

By MAUREEN SANTINI
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ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP)—Only the names and faces of the troubled teen-agers varied. Their declarations before a huge audience that included a tearful Nancy Reagan were always the same: "I am a druggie."

For three hours Monday night, the first lady sat in a hot auditorium crowded with 300 drug-prone adolescents and 600 anxious parents involved in a treatment program called Straight Inc.

She listened to the songs they sang enthusiastically. She heard an unending litany of substances they once used to "get high." And she watched as a microphone was passed from parent to parent, some scolding their children for setbacks, others offering praise and love.

And when the microphone finally got to the president's wife, her voice choked.

"My heart is filled with so many things," she told the teen-agers. "I am so proud of you and I love you, too."

Tears welling in her eyes, she turned to the parents:

"Being a parent myself, I know how painful it must be for you. There's nothing as painful for a parent as having something happen to their children and nothing as hurtful."

Then again to the youngsters:

"I wish you all the best of luck and the most wonderful lives and I know you will have it. I know everything will be just fine."

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Mrs. Reagan from page 1

Mrs. Reagan's two-day trip on behalf of drug abuse prevention was concluding today after a stop in Dallas.

Monday night's program was an unusual experience.

First, the children singing from their seats in front of the auditorium while their parents waited outside; loud, loud singing; a cappella; with hands moving in unison; such songs as "America" and "I'm On My Way."

Next, the counselors would ask what was the most outrageous substance they had ever used (roach killer); the most outrageous place they found to hide drugs (parents' mattress); how many had introduced drugs to children they babysat for (about half); and so on.

Girls were pitted against the boys. The competition was so strong that one counselor finally pleaded, "C'mon, girls. You can top the guys." All 300 of the children frantically waved their hands high in the air for a chance to reveal how

outrageous they once had been.

Then the parents were admitted. Slowly and silently they filed in one-by-one, filling all the seats in one row before starting the next.

The true confessions began.

Children who were new to the program stood up and recited the substances they had used—pot, acid, uppers, downers, on and on—always ending with, "I am a druggie."

Individually, they apologized for how they had lied to their families and stolen. They renounced their former "druggie" friends. They set goals, usually a desire to be more honest and open with their feelings and to rebuild their family relationships.

"I was a low-life daughter," confessed one girl, who under Straight Inc. rules must remain anonymous. "I feel real bad about that. My long-term goal is to earn the privilege to go home." She began to cry.

A boy volunteered: "The friends I had, they were druggies. They weren't really friends."

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Next, it was time for the parents. Some said simply, "I love you, Laura." The girl would shout out in return, "Love you, Mom."

The children, in unison, would chant, "Love you, Laura."

One father declared: "It seems like a bad dream." Another man told his son, "I'm learning about my feelings. We are more open at home."

A mother told her daughter, "For the first time in your life you're happy." Another mother said she was confused. Still another was "really mad because I have given, given, given. I am in this program to stay."

And so it went. The audience seemed spellbound. With the least bit of encouragement, they would jump to their feet and applaud loudly.

For many children, the program takes a full year. The first 30 or 40 days are spent away from home with a foster family that has a child who is nearly finished with the program. For the remainder of the time, the child returns home.

Program officials say 50 percent of their participants are drug free one year later, 25 percent "have problems" and return for a refresher course, and 25 percent go back to drugs.

The program costs parents between \$1,000 and \$2,500. It gets no government funds.