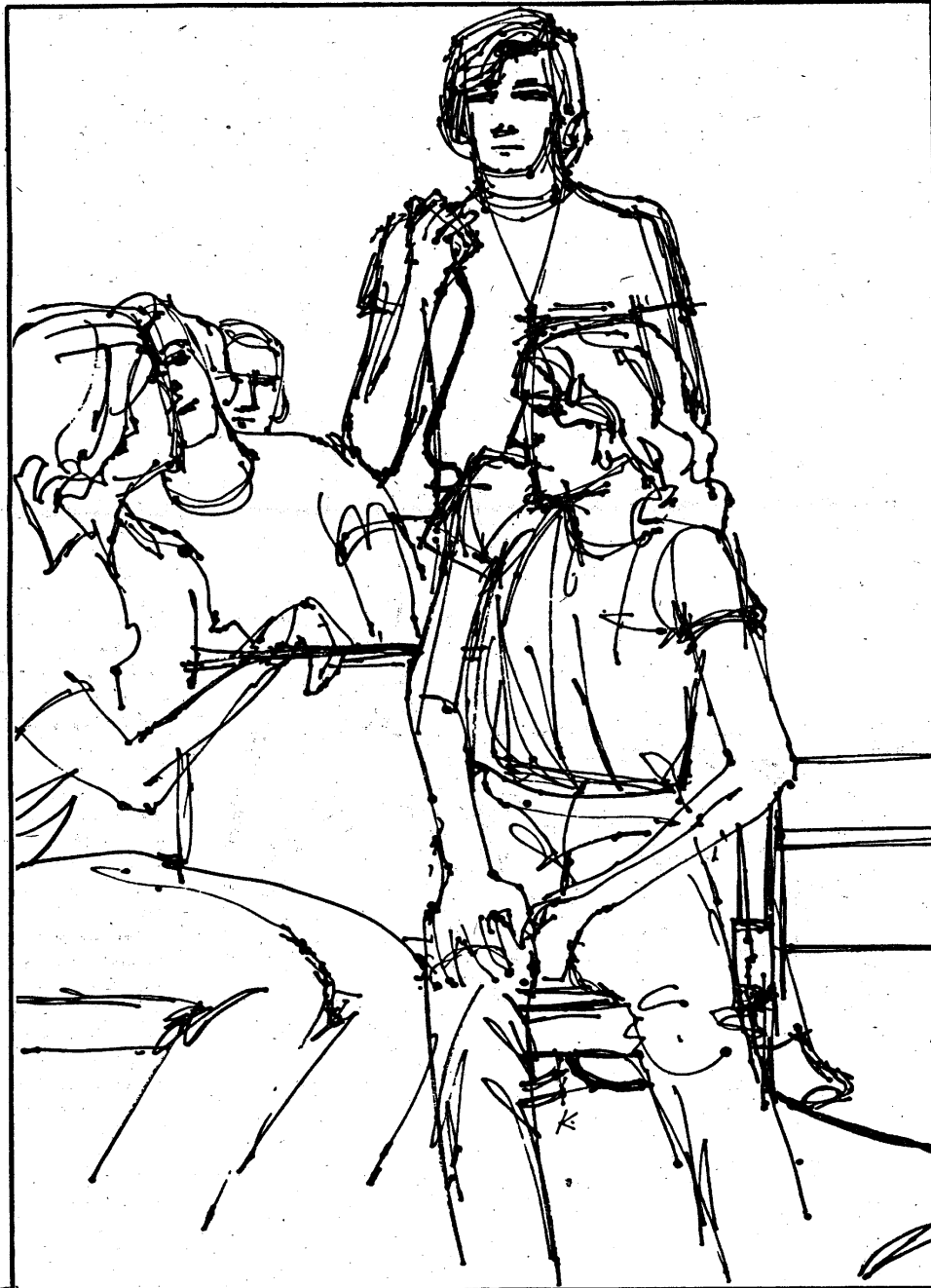


# Getting Straight

Drug Rehabilitation  
agencies - Straight Inc.

**Straight Inc.** is a program in which young people help other young people turn away from drug use. A similar program didn't win community support, but this one seems to be working.

By Barbara Hunting / Illustrated by Lee Kershner



**A Straight newcomer tells of his drug experiences.**

Tears rolled down the cheeks of a fair-haired, chubby boy who hung his head and clutched a portable microphone tightly.

"My name is Tom. I'm 13 years old. I've been here for four days. The drugs I did were pot, alcohol, LSD, uppers, downers, mushrooms, and I huffed gas. I don't want to be here. When I was a druggie I had a lot of fun. I skipped school. I was never home. My parents put me in here against my will. All I want is to get out of here."

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She had long black hair which was pulled back off her freshly scrubbed face. Her T-shirt was emblazoned with a yellow tiger. She stammered.

"My name is Sheila. I'm 14. I've been here for 10 days. The drugs I did were alcohol, pot, speed and LSD. I've been on drugs for three years. When I was at home I didn't work or help my mom. I slept most of the time. I

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skipped school. My grades were lousy. When my eyes were red from smoking pot, I told my family my allergies were acting up. I don't want to be here. My parents tricked me into coming. They told me I was going for counseling. I guess I'll stay. I've thought about splitting but I know they'll catch me.

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These young teenagers were two of the dozen or so who stood up in a crowded St. Petersburg warehouse one night recently and confessed their drug experiences into a microphone. Their parents sat on the other side of the room. They listened, and eventually they talked, too.

They were all involved in an intensive anti-drug program called Straight Inc. The program is similar in concept to an unconventional and controversial anti-drug program of several years ago called The Seed, which is now defunct in St. Petersburg but still operating in Ft. Lauderdale.

The underlying philosophy of

both Straight and The Seed is that it is through one's peers, friends, and associates that a person becomes a drug user. Thus, the reasoning goes, a young person can be turned away from drugs through peer pressure.

The 250 young people (their ages range from 12 to 18) enrolled in Straight must also undergo a separation from their parents; during this period, their parents do not know where they are. While separated from their families, they are subjected to intensive group pressure to give up drugs and drug-taking friends and go "straight."

In addition to Monday and Friday night sessions in the warehouse, which last for five hours, Straight participants undergo a rigorous schedule of smaller group "raps" with former drug users who are part-time members of the program's staff. These discussions last for 10 hours, six days a week; six hours on Sundays — plus the Monday and Friday night sessions.

When not involved in rap ses-

sions, which cover attitudes, drugs, self discipline, personal hygiene and authority, the teenagers spend at least their first two weeks in foster homes, under a form of house arrest. They are not allowed money or identification cards; they must prepare daily lists of their personal attitudes; they can communicate with their parents only after the open meetings and only after the entire group approves.

All decisions on the progress of the teenagers in the program, in fact, are made by their peers. Other Straight participants decide when a young person may be given responsibilities (such as working in the warehouse) or privileges. A Straight enrollee is not allowed to go home until the group and the staff agree that he or she is ready.

It is this type of regimentation and total dedication to a group that brought The Seed some of the criticism it has collected during the past several years. The program operated for one year in St. Petersburg, but it pulled out because of lack of funding.

The Seed was cited in a 1974 U. S. Senate report on constitutional rights as creating young "seedlings" (the program's name for its participants) who "seem to be living in a robot-like atmosphere" and "seem to have an informing system on each other and on others that is similar to Nazi Germany." And, the Seed came under fire for the secrecy imposed on it by founder Art Barker. Barker refused to let outsiders observe his program, which also was criticized for having poor statistical documentation and few professional staff members.

The people who run Straight Inc., however, say there is still a need in St. Petersburg for a program much like Seed's — but, they say, they have avoided these pitfalls.

Straight staff coordinator Helen Peterman says that the new program has made a conscious effort to avoid the aura of secrecy that surrounded Seed. "We want the parents to know every facet of our program; in Seed, if a parent asked a question, they would say 'We don't have to tell you why — it's for the good of your child.'"

"We have six parent raps, and they are mandatory. We want the

**Parents talk to their children  
in front of the group.**



## Straight/continued

parents to understand why we have the rules we do."

Peterman says there is no secrecy in the Straight program, although the large and small rap sessions are not open to the public. State licensing inspectors and state department of health and rehabilitative services personnel "can come in here anytime and go through our program. Our books are open, our kitchen is open. We even encourage the DYS (division of youth services) to come in here and use our offices when they want to work with one of their clients," she said.

Peterman, who has no formal background in drug rehabilitation or social services "other than my 20 years of working with children," also worked with the Seed program on the lower east coast. She said Seed employees heard the "robot" charge "all the time." She blamed that label partly on young people trying to avoid being placed in the program by turning their parents against it, and partly on Seed's own philosophy.

"Our kids are far more relaxed, and they are accepted in the schools more. We don't have the antagonism of kids going down the halls in school and saying to their druggie friends 'I love you.'"

The "I love you" approach was encouraged by Seed, but Straight has "avoided that, although we do permit the parents and children to express their feelings," Peterman said. And, she added, "we don't get them to think the way we want them to think — it's kids working with kids."

Seed was also criticized for a lack of professional staff; that program was run by a self-admitted reformed alcoholic. According to Peterman, Straight director Jim Hartz, who has a master's degree in psychology, is the program's only full-time professional. Some of the program's graduates who are on the staff as counselors are working on degrees in related fields, Peterman said, and a psychiatrist is on the board of directors. "We give him referrals if we need to," she said.

Some of Seed's difficulties arose when it refused federal grants from the National Institute of Mental Health because the institute asked for assurances that the rights and well-being of the young people were being protected.

Straight Inc. has so far been

funded with private money (there is a \$350 fee per child and some money is available for children whose parents can't pay) but is applying for a \$51,000 federal Law Enforcement Assistance grant, according to Peterman.

Straight has been underway since the fall of 1976, when a group of St. Petersburg business people began to contact people who had worked with Seed or who had had children in that program.

Some \$12,000 was donated by

this country. When you have undisciplined young people — you have a problem," Hartz said.

Mel Sembler, a shopping center developer who is president of Straight Inc., says that director Hartz does not over-do the discipline, however. "The kids like him and he makes them feel important by using discipline but not browbeating them," Sembler says.

The young people who come in contact with Hartz are referred to the Straight program by the courts,

cannot be helped, but for the children whose parents are willing to work with them, it is a wonderful program."

And, the judge said, Straight has managed to get support in the community that Seed lacked.

Bill Justice, administrative assistant to the Pinellas associate superintendent of schools, says he's impressed with the program, also. "Straight doesn't break the kid's self-respect, which I'm afraid was one of the faults of The Seed," Justice said. "The kids come back to school happier than the ones we used to get from The Seed. The attitude change is good, and it's wholesome."

The state department of health and rehabilitative services checked out Straight before granting it a license last year. Jim Holley, alcohol and drug abuse program specialist for district five, evaluated the program. "As I understand it, they have taken from Seed what I consider the better aspects — and it wasn't all bad — and added to it some things to come up with their own program," he said. "We've had a minimum number of complaints, a surprisingly small number, considering that it is such an intensive program."

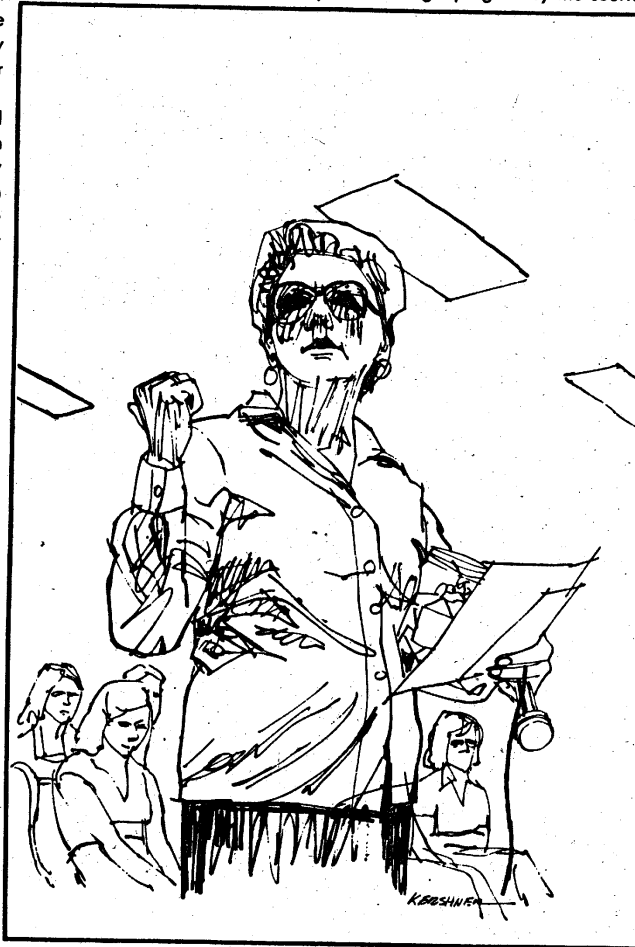
Straight has provided the state with access to its records, which Holley checked recently for annual re-licensing and pronounced "in good shape." In fact, Holley said, "the kids are responding to it, and it seems to be working."

Straight has grown rapidly. It began less than a year ago with only five children and their parents. Now, 250 young people are enrolled, and there have been 42 "graduates" of the program. When they enter the program, they may have similar experiences to a girl we shall call Mary.

Mary is 14 and on drugs. she's skipping school, and has been sent home from school for being intoxicated. A meeting is set up among the dean of girls, a counselor, Mary, and her parents. During the meeting, it is determined that the youngster has a drug problem. The school personnel recommend Straight Inc. and give Mary's parents the unlisted telephone number.

The parents make an appointment to take Mary to Straight and are told not to tell their daughter where they are taking her, and not to pack a suitcase for her. She'll get her clothes later.

The three drive to a warehouse set back off a street in an industrial section of St. Petersburg. The



**Helen Peterman, staff coordinator.**

interested citizens, and a donor who wants to remain anonymous provided a building. "We wanted a director who was a professional but had no experience with The Seed," said Dr. Leon Sellars, a St. Petersburg veterinarian who had worked with Seed and was one of the founders of Straight.

The new program's board of directors chose Hartz, 28, a psychologist who was working with retarded children in Augusta, Ga. Hartz is an ex-Marine who says he has a great respect for discipline.

"Doing your own thing was the worst thing that ever happened to

the state division of youth services, the schools, and people already enrolled in the program.

Judge Jack A. Page, Pinellas County juvenile judge for the sixth judicial circuit, has sent young drug offenders to Straight. He thinks the program is achieving success.

"I've seen the results and I've talked to teachers and principals who have told me that the change in the children from Straight is remarkable. Their rapid rise in the academic part of it is noticeable," he said. "Some children, of course,

ilding is new and well main-  
ned. They enter through sliding  
ss doors into a large, carpeted  
om — a volunteer sits by the  
or and locks and unlocks it as  
ople enter and leave.

Mary and her parents wait in a  
all room off the main room  
arked Intake Room 1. A staff  
amber comes in and begins talk-  
g to Mary. The teenager and her  
rents are asked to sign a paper  
ating that they agree to her living  
a foster home and being re-  
onsible for various chores.

By this time, Mary is hysterical.  
e is crying. She tries to run  
way. But a staff member has al-  
ady barricaded the door with a  
air. If a minor such as Mary re-  
ses to sign the paper, her parents  
ay sign her into the program, ac-  
rding to staff coordinator Peter-  
ian; a person over 18 would have

**straight staffers say they see  
ttitude changes like the one  
this teenager; sketched at  
ft when he first entered the  
rogram, and then two  
ecks later.**

to sign himself or herself in.

Peterman says it is legal for the  
parents of a minor to sign their  
child into Straight's foster care; all  
but "one or two" minors have re-  
fused to go along with their par-  
ents, she says. If a minor balks,  
"we usually bring two or three of  
the girls who have been through  
the program out to talk to them —  
by the time we're through talking  
to them, they want to sign."

Peterman adds, "Many of them  
are crying for help; after all, we  
fear what we don't know. Once  
you bring the other kids in to talk  
to them, you have their signature."

After the signing, Mary's purse  
is searched, and drugs and non-es-  
sentials are removed. Mary's par-  
ents leave, and don't see her again  
until the first open meeting follow-  
ing the intake. They don't know  
where their daughter will be living,  
or with whom. Mary will have a  
physical examination administered  
by one of several local doctors  
who have volunteered their time to  
the program.

At 7 p.m. the next Monday,  
Mary's parents walk into the ware-

house and find over 100 parents  
milling around, drinking coffee and  
chatting. The parents congregate in  
the unairconditioned back part of  
the warehouse, where the rap ses-  
sions are held. The teenagers are  
in the smaller section, which is car-  
peted and air conditioned.

The parents are led into the air-  
conditioned section and are seated  
facing the teenagers, who are ar-  
ranged with the boys on one side,  
girls on the other. Mary's parents  
will see their daughter singing: "If  
you're straight and you know it,  
clap your hands...If you're straight  
and you know it, snap your fin-  
gers..."

A junior staff member conducts  
the meeting, and the young people  
who are new in the program sit in  
the front row and talk, one by one,  
into a microphone. They are in-  
structed to stand up, tell their  
name, what drugs they have used,  
and their goals. Then, their parents  
take turns talking into the micro-  
phone.

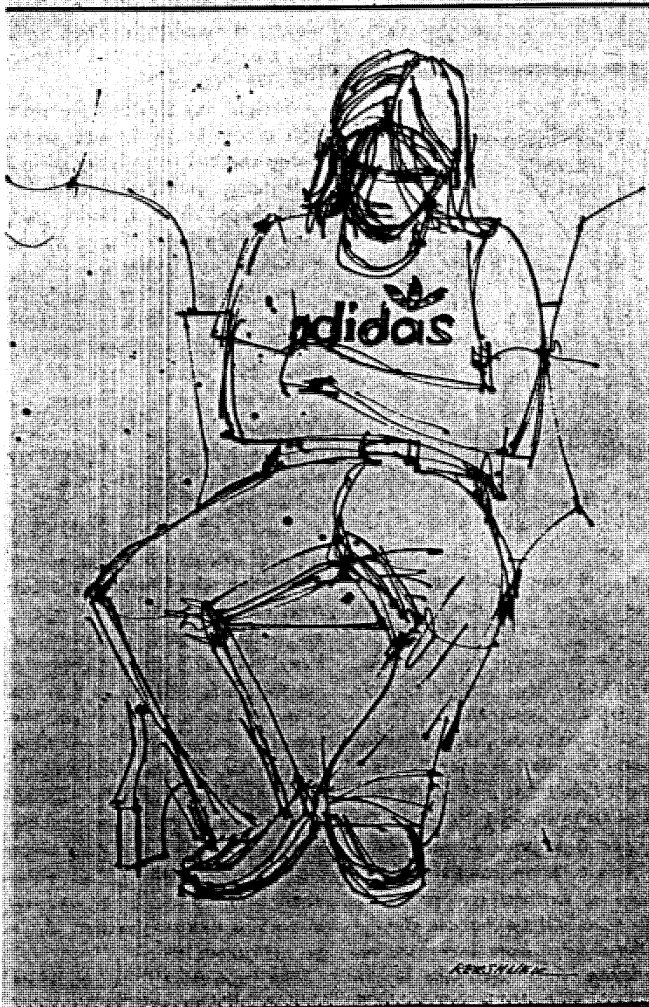
Mary's father, a short, middle-  
aged man dressed in a sports shirt  
and slacks, addresses himself to his

offspring. "Hello, Mary. I don't  
know what to say to tell you how I  
feel except that I'm glad you're  
here. We know you aren't getting  
any drugs and we know you will  
have many friends who will help  
you in the program. We want you  
to work. Get out all those things  
inside that are bothering you. I  
miss you terribly. The house  
doesn't seem quite the same. Your  
mother and I will be here every  
Monday and Friday nights."

At the end of the meeting,  
everyone joins hands and repeats  
the Lord's prayer. Mary will  
resume her intensive meetings with  
other young people and counselors  
who will attempt to persuade her  
to drop her "druggie" friends and  
"go straight." Eventually, Mary  
will be allowed to live at home,  
and, her parents will be asked to  
house a program newcomer.

On Friday nights, the meeting is  
cut short so that parent raps may  
be held. These sessions are con-  
ducted by staff members, so that  
parents can talk about mutual  
problems.

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parent, who praises the program, but removed her daughter from it before "graduation," said she resented the lecture on alcoholism given to the parents. "They even show you a film on alcoholism, and they try to get the parents to give up drinking. They're against all drugs, but I am a responsible adult and I'm not going to stop having a social drink," she said.

Some parents grumble about the length of the open meetings, and about the inconvenience when their offspring is first allowed home, but is still required to live under strict rules. "We couldn't have any company. We had to drive our child to the program, 20 miles each way. We could not have friends around the house at all. Our daughter couldn't go outdoors. She couldn't listen to the radio or watch TV. It was rugged," one parent said.

However such complaints seem minor to the parents crowded in

the warehouse on Monday and Friday nights. What matters to them is that many of their youngsters are benefiting from Straight. "You would not believe the program and how it has helped our daughter," one parent said. "She's in the top half of her class and she was failing before. She is no more the same child that I took to Straight than the man in the moon."

And one graduate from the unconventional program had this even more moving praise:

"I came here and I did not want to be in Straight. I thought everybody in here was a jerk. I expected to be brainwashed and at school we used to call the kids that went to Straight 'zombies.' Well, I've learned that is not true. I am now on the dean's list and I want to go to college. I owe Straight a lot and I hope to work part-time on the staff. Straight has saved my life. I probably would be in jail today if it were not for Straight."