

Yet another hot potato falls into Newton's hands Series: Off/Beat

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In the beginning, there was controversy, and lo, in the center of the controversy, was Miller Newton.

Only the Newton-centered controversies that occupied so much of my time in 1973 when I was a new reporter in Pasco County and he was the newly appointed circuit clerk there have now reached national scale. If you don't believe it, catch this Saturday's installment of West 57th on CBS.

Newton is the head of Kids of Bergen County Inc., a drug and behavioral disorder treatment program at the center of controversy in the New Jersey-New York area.

Newton was appointed to his Pasco job after his predecessor got into some trouble for allegedly mingling government funds with his own and resigned from office. Newton's predecessor was placed on probation on misdemeanor charges stemming from what had - until then - been a traditional practice.

During his three years in office in Pasco, Newton was engaged in almost constant controversy as he battled with the county's first county administrator, George Knoblock.

Those three years were sandwiched between unsuccessful races for the U.S. House of Representatives, the last one in 1976.

I remember that last race clearly, because Wife and I were married - by Newton - in a hotel suite only a few feet away from Newton's campaign headquarters at what is now the New Port Richey Sheraton Inn.

Always the fiscal conservative, Newton killed two birds with one stone and used pictures of our wedding guests in his campaign brochure.

That campaign ended Newton's political career, except for a brief foray last year when he ran for mayor of Madeira Beach, also unsuccessfully.

But an end to politics did not mean an end to controversy for Newton. When one of his children developed a drug dependency problem in 1980, Newton became active in and eventually became national clinical director of Straight Inc., acquiring a doctor's degree along the way.

Like any drug treatment program, Straight's methods are controversial. Although Newton points out that the program was cleared of any wrongdoing while he was there, there has been frequent criticism of the program - almost always from those who left without completing it.

That, he said from his Hackensack, N.J., office Monday, is the basis of the West 57th segment.

``It's pretty much the same thing,`` said Newton. ``They've gotten hold of a couple of pull-offs from the program who are bitching about it.``

Newton said that one of the people interviewed by the program ``was using at the time and has gone back to being sober and has said that things he said were not true.``

A public relations spokesman for West 57th confirmed that the segment, which was promoted at the end of Saturday's show, deals with the controversial method of treatment at the center but said he did not have much more information about the segment and wasn't sure where the treatment center was located.

Unlike Straight Inc., Kids of Bergen County additionally deals with such behavioral problems and eating disorders as anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Newton said a positive piece about the eating disorders treatment was begun but never finished by the network news magazine program.

"We're concerned about what the content of this piece might be because of the kind of questions we were asked," he said.

"It's kind of ironic," Newton said. "The nephews of three board members of CBS have gone through the program and one of our consulting psychiatrists is a third cousin of (CBS Board Chairman) Larry Tisch."

Newton and his wife, Ruth Ann, still maintain a home in Madeira Beach and have recently developed an interest in sailing.

"Sometimes I think that if I could make a living taking charters - I'd just sail away into the Caribbean," he said. Jan Glidewell is a columnist for the Times' North Suncoast regionals.

[Illustration]

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Caption: Miller Newton (ran CTI TP)

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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