

Going Straight // Part 4: A young man falls apart Series: Going Straight

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Part 4: A young man falls apart

The worst week in the life of 16-year-old Paul [REDACTED] began when he opened the front door of his house.

It was almost 10 p.m. on Aug. 18, 1986, a quiet Monday night in the suburbs of north Tampa. Paul's father was in the kitchen, eating a late dinner at the formica-topped dinette, glancing at the paper. His mother was out walking the dog. She was only a minute or two down the street, probably nearing the corner, when Paul came down the carpeted hallway and eased the front door open.

He shouldn't have been anywhere near the door. He should have been back in his bedroom where his mother had left him, door closed, light on. He stepped outside and edged along the side of his house, away from the street lamps. He moved in shadows and cut over to a neighbor's yard. For a moment, he wondered if he was being foolish, if he could make it unnoticed back to his room, but then he cut through another yard, emerged on an adjacent street and started to run.

His mother, Julie, was gone 10 minutes at the most. When she came back and saw the front door open, she knew something was wrong. "Paul?" she called. Her husband, Bill, came out of the kitchen. "Paul?" she called again, louder.

She and Bill hurried up the hall to Paul's room, listening hard for him, alarm taking root, hoping he was only hiding. They looked in the bathroom - empty - in the den - empty - all through the house, in the front yard, in the back yard, in the bushes, up and down the street.

Full panic took hold now. Bill got in his pickup truck and began driving the neighborhood. Julie and Paul's sister, Jodie, got in another car and drove to the Farm Store, to the Circle K, to the Amoco, showing around a photo of a smiling boy with brown hair and baby skin. No one had seen him.

They called the police. Midnight came and went. They sat and waited for a phone call, or, better, for Paul to walk back in, to hug them, to hang his head and say he couldn't run away after all, that he loved them too much. Three a.m. came and went. Bill fidgeted. Jodie cried. Julie was quiet. Her mind, though, was busy.

With unnerving clarity, she saw her son as he had been a few months before: sitting around with his friends, smoking pot, sniffing cocaine, mean, defiant, high to the point of dizziness, his eyes shiny, his cheeks sunken, so skinny his ribs showed.

"Just looking very unhappy." A perplexing act

The thing is, he had been doing so well. One hundred-forty days into a drug rehabilitation program called Straight, Paul had changed from a sullen, bristling young man into someone who paid attention, who smiled easily, who hugged his parents every night before bed and said, "I love you."

In Straight, one of the largest - and most controversial - drug programs in the country, such changes are part of how success is defined. Undoubtedly in some cases, the changes are contrived; one of the first things a person new to Straight realizes is that the best way to get out of the program is to go along with it.

But in Paul's case, the program truly seemed to be working wonders.

For instance, to be called on to speak in Straight, a person has to show he wants to speak more than anyone else. The way this is done is by putting a hand in the air - not just lazily holding it up, but stabbing it up and down, waving it back and forth, pumping it like a piston. Paul learned to do this and more. He would wave his hand so hard that his chair would creak, his bones would crack, his fingers would snap. Sometimes, he would propel himself right out of his seat.

He was the same way when called on to talk. If he was depressed, he would let the tears flow, even though dozens of other teen-agers were watching. If he was happy, people could float along on his smile, it was so big.

All of this, then, made his running away that much more perplexing.

He had come so far. He had completed the first phase of the program, probably the worst time of all, a time of mandatory abstinence from home, parents, friends, TV and music.

He had completed Second Phase, which meant he was allowed to return home at night to sleep.

He had completed Third Phase, which meant a return to a special school at Straight.

He had been elevated to Fourth Phase, which meant having three days off from the program every week. He had only one more phase to go, a few months at the most.

"He's doing so well," Julie said proudly one afternoon. That night, he ran. Out of control.

Fifteen hours went by before Paul phoned home. Julie answered and breathed a sigh of relief when she heard her son's voice.

It was immediately clear to her, though, that whatever had driven Paul away was still in his mind. He sounded upset and on edge. He said he had been up all night. He offered no explanation for running, other than to say things had gotten to be too much.

He said that he had smoked cigarettes, that he had been offered drugs, that he had turned them down, that he was safe, that he was sorry, that he was coming home.

"You're going to have to go back into the program," Julie told him.

"Well, maybe I don't need it," Paul said.

"Well, I think you do," Julie said.

He came home. Late that afternoon, Paul, Bill and Julie returned to Straight. It was a tense return, however; even as they walked in the front door, Paul and Bill were fighting over whether Paul could bring cigarettes inside.

"You can't," Bill said.

"Go to hell," Paul said.

Less than a day had gone by, but everything had changed; the faces were proof. Paul's glow had turned into belligerence. Bill looked furious. And Julie looked devastated as she watched her son sign himself back into the program.

"Paul, glad to see you back, buddy," said the staff member who watched him sign in. "I'm proud of you."

"Yeah," Paul said.

"What drugs did you do?"

"Smoked cigarettes," Paul said. "Will I be able to eat something?"

He was taken to a bathroom to give a urine sample that could be tested for drugs (it was clean except for nicotine). He was taken from there through a series of halls until he came to a huge room in the very back of the building. There, deep in the afternoon discussion, were the others in Straight, the other young men and women he had left behind.

Paul stood and watched a moment. He was led to a seat in the second row, on the aisle. A few people hugged him. One person patted him on the back.

"Don't do that," he said sharply.

He leaned forward and rested his head on the chair in front of him.

"Glad to see you back, Paul," said a young man in front of the group, a recent graduate of the program who was helping lead the afternoon discussion.

“Thanks,” Paul said without lifting his head. His tone was mocking. The young man who had patted him on the back patted him again, this time harder.

“Don’t,” Paul said.

“Paul, why don’t you settle down,” the leader suggested. “The whole group knows you’re back. Group, do you know Paul’s back?”

Everyone in the room raised a hand in the air and looked at Paul, who looked back at them angrily. One young man came over to talk to him, but when Paul saw him, he stood up and began to run.

Immediately, chairs scraped back, and people jumped for him to keep him from getting away. Someone grabbed him around the waist, and Paul started to swing.

He was tackled by five or six young men, who pushed him backward onto the concrete floor. He strained against them to get up, but they were too much for him. He tensed so tightly he turned crimson. He began crying. He began spitting in their faces. “Shhhh,” someone said to him, leaning close, trying to soothe him, but he was out of control.

Pinned on the floor, he growled like an animal. He spit at blurred faces and gasped for air as if he were being choked. He tensed so hard he began to quiver, and finally he let loose a sickening roar that echoed so loudly, staff members came running from every part of the building.

“Face forward! Let’s have a song!” one of them yelled to the group, trying to divert attention from the pitiful spectacle of a young man falling apart.

Amazingly, everyone began to sing a song they had been taught about Straight, loudly and in unison. But even when their voices swelled, it wasn’t enough to completely distract them from Paul as he continued to struggle in the back of the room, screaming, then just crying, then just shaking, then just breathing hard. ‘Why’d you change?’

At Straight, where the pressures on a person can sometimes seem suffocating, behavior such as Paul’s isn’t common, but neither is it unheard of. This isn’t a program for obedient and well-mannered children, after all, but for young, drug-dependent people who know how to taunt and how to fight.

Few enroll in the program voluntarily. Most are forced in by their parents, and some are there by court order, as a last chance before being sent to jail. On any given day, chairs might get thrown, people might get punched. And at some point, almost everyone in the program tries to run.

Of those who do run, most sink back into drug use as soon as they get the chance. Some just flirt with it to remind themselves of how it was, others stay with it. Some are gone from the program only a few hours, others don’t come back.

In Paul’s case, the theories to explain his behavior were many: He was especially immature for his age; he needed special attention; he was fed up with the incessant demands of the program. His only hint was what he had said to his mother on the phone, that everything had simply gotten to be too much.

Surely there were deeper reasons, but whatever they were, they stayed hidden within him; meanwhile, he got worse.

He found a paper clip on the floor and began making scratches along the soft underside of his left forearm.

“What happened to your arm?” a staff member asked him.

“I cut it. Not bad,” Paul said.

“Did it do what you wanted?”

“Yeah. It got the feelings out. They escaped right out.”

He smiled. Later, though, he found a small piece of glass on the floor and began scratching the tops of his fingers until they bled.

Four days after his return to the program, Straight officials began wondering whether Paul was simply hurting himself for attention or whether there were deeper problems involved. His arms and fingers were a mess. He had been restrained several times each day for fighting, and once, when taken to a room to cool off, he had ripped out part of the ceiling.

Charles Larsen, a clinical psychologist employed at the time as Straight-Tampa Bay’s associate director, wanted Paul taken to a hospital for psychiatric observation. “What Paul is experiencing is ambivalence,” he explained. “On one hand, he knows he needs to be in the program, he knows he’s chemically dependent. On the other hand, it’s mighty appealing to be out there and have your freedom. What it does is tear you in half.”

But Steve Knowles, the program's director, disagreed. "Paul," he said, "is suffering from two diseases: chemical dependency and adolescence." He decided to give Paul one more chance at that night's open meeting, the one time each week when all the people in Straight meet face-to-face with their parents in a giant assembly.

Paul was placed in the very back row, almost hidden from view. He watched as his parents and sister filed in with the others. When their turn came to speak, they stood, but he stayed in his seat.

"Paul, stand up, please," Bill said into a microphone that had been passed to him so that Paul and everyone else in the room could hear what he had to say.

Paul stayed seated.

Bill waited for him to stand. "You're just making an ass of yourself," he said.

Paul shook his head.

"Yes you are," Bill said quietly and passed the microphone to Julie.

Trembling a bit, she said, "We realize you're hurting, and we are, too. We love and support you and hope you can do it." Paul still didn't stand, but the smirk on his face disappeared.

Jodie took the microphone. "Paul, you were so strong," she said, starting to cry. "Why'd you change?" She began crying too hard to go on, and suddenly Paul pushed back his chair and ran.

Again, he was grabbed. Again, he was tackled. But this time, instead of being restrained on the floor, he was carried kicking and screaming from the room while a hundred people looked on, including Bill, who stared in disgust, and Julie, who put a hand to her mouth until she finally closed her eyes. A call to police

This is what happened next:

Paul was carried to a far hallway and placed on his back on the floor.

Bill and Julie were brought to see him.

Bill kneeled and held his son's face in his hands.

Paul looked in his father's eyes and said, "You f---ing son-of-a-b----."

Bill said, "I still love you, Paul," and walked away.

Charles Larsen called Bill and Julie into his office and told them that Paul should be taken to a hospital for observation.

Julie, afraid of this, said, "Will this alienate us from him?"

Bill said, "It doesn't matter. We've got no choice."

Larsen said, "Do you want to take him in your car or do you think the police need to take him?"

Julie said, "Could I just talk to him first? I just think I could get through to him."

Larsen, not wanting to wait any longer, phoned the Pinellas Park police and said a young man at Straight needed to be transported to Morton Plant Hospital in Clearwater.

Julie said, "He's listened to me, always. When he's high. When he's not high."

Larsen said, "I'm sorry."

The police came and handcuffed Paul.

Julie wept so hard it seemed her grief would never reach bottom.

Paul was taken away.

Bill and Julie followed. "I want to start new"

That should have been it. Paul was gone; so long, Paul. The group, no doubt, would survive just fine without him.

Yet three days after he was taken away, he was back again, standing before the group, asking for forgiveness.

In the hospital, nothing much had happened to him. He had calmed down. He had drawn a few pictures for a psychiatrist. He had talked to the psychiatrist, who said he was fine. Most importantly, he had been given time alone to

put things in perspective, to balance the hardships of Straight against the sadness and dullness that previously had been defining his life.

One more try, he decided, might be a blessing.

So he was back, a subdued young man. He stood before the group with a sense of uncertainty, the surliness gone, replaced, it seemed, by doubt. Head down, voice quiet, hands jammed in pockets, he tried to explain how he was feeling. "It's real scary coming back again," he said. "I feel like people are going to hold grudges against me because of what I did. Now that I'm back, I'm just real scared about what people are thinking, that I'm crazy."

"I don't want you to worry about that," a group leader said to him. "People are damn glad to see you back."

"I get this rage inside me," Paul went on. "I don't know how to deal with it. I don't know what to do sometimes. I tell myself I'm going to sit here and make it, but then I get thoughts about just running for the door and getting out of here. I become embarrassed about these thoughts. I feel like I'm crazy or something. I guess that's why I was sent there to Morton Plant, because I have these kinds of thoughts. I was talking to the doctor there, he said, 'You need to work on these thoughts.' But I don't know how to deal with them."

"You're not crazy," a young woman in the program said. "You're a good person. I support you a lot. I care about you a lot, and I'm glad you're back."

"I'm feeling real depressed over what I did," Paul said. "I screwed a lot of people over. I want to stay away from how I was feeling. I want to start all over. I want to start new."

He took a seat and drew a breath. Deeper explanations would come later, but for the moment, he seemed a relieved young man.

"We love you, Paul," the group said in unison. Several people came over and patted him on the back. This time, he smiled. Everyone put a hand in the air to be called on to talk, and he did, too. At first he just held it there, but soon he was waving it back and forth, stabbing it up and down, pumping it like a piston. His chair creaked. His bones cracked. His fingers snapped. The worst week in his life was over.

Onto better times. Onto Day No. 148. Next: A final attempt A daily report

Each evening, all clients in Straight are required to write a "Moral Inventory," or "MI," in which they summarize their day, emphasize any good points from all that went on and set goals for the following days and weeks. This is the MI Paul [REDACTED] wrote after his 37th day in Straight:

Challenge: This morning I was in a good mood when we got to the building. I felt like sharing feelings on misbehaving but I didn't (get called on) so I kept it in all day and I started to f--- around during morning rap and I fell into my pity and I hyperventilated and staff caught me and asked me why I was doing that and I said because I am frustrated and looking for a buzz. So after the person was done talking staff called on me and I started talking about missing my past and how I feel lonely and they said that a lot of people care about me and that when I told the group what I did I was embarrassed but I shared a lot of feeling about it and I got a little bit resolved. For the rest of the day I would do little s--- like talk out to newcomers and not motivate. But I didn't misbehave and I am doing pretty good except I am kind of sitting in my s---.

Good points: That I am setting an example with other newcomers. I am working and learning my new program. That I am caring more about people. That I shared feelings on how I didn't have friends in my past. And that I am 37 days straight.

Goals: I would like to talk to (another young man in the program) about my feelings toward misbehaving and how I feel about hyperventilating. I would like to go into group and talk about how I feel about maybe having to leave my host home.

Blessing: Dear God, please bless my mom, dad, sister, brother and the rest of the people I know. About the series

This series was begun 16 months ago when officials of Straight, responding to a request from the St. Petersburg Times, consented to allow a Times reporter to follow a person through its drug-rehabilitation program. Among the conditions agreed to by Straight were these:

The Times would choose the person to follow.

The Times would have unrestricted access to the person.

The Times would be able to follow the person's progress from the moment he first entered the program.

Times reporter David Finkel sat in on several admission interviews before Paul [REDACTED] and his family were chosen on March 31, 1986, to be the subjects of the series. While keeping continual track of Paul's progress, the Times decided not to publish any stories in the series until he had left the program so as not to interfere with his chances for success.

[Illustration]

COLOR PHOTO, Eric ██████; COLOR PHOTO, Cherie ██████ BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, Cherie ██████ Caption: Paul ██████; Several times a day, clients in Straight put their arms around each other to show unity; To be called on to speak in Straight, a person has to show he wants to speak more than anyone else.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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His mother, Julie, was gone 10 minutes at the most. When she came back and saw the front door open, she knew something was wrong. "Paul?" she called. Her husband, Bill, came out of the kitchen. "Paul?" she called again, louder.

He came home. Late that afternoon, Paul, Bill and Julie returned to Straight. It was a tense return, however; even as they walked in the front door, Paul and Bill were fighting over whether Paul could bring cigarettes inside.

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