

Going Straight // Part 5: After 376 days, 'I made it' Series: GOING STRAIGHT

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Last in a series

On the day before his 16th birthday, Paul [REDACTED] got a card with a letter tucked inside. "Dear Paul," it began.

It was from his mother. He knew it as soon as he saw the writing. Something about a mother's handwriting - it was as familiar to him as his own.

She wrote: "Sixteen years ago today, I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. The moment I saw you, I loved you with all my heart ..."

She had written him a lot of little notes over the years: notes on birthday cards, notes for school. Never, though, had she written him a letter like this.

"Maybe I didn't always make the best choices, but hopefully you forgave me and I learned from my mistakes. I hope this time I made the right decision and that in time you will see it too. After sixteen years of loving you and watching you grow, I don't want to lose you ..."

He started to cry.

"If you are angry when you read this, please remember this birthday can be the beginning of a whole new life for you and those who really love you and care for you. We feel this is the best gift we could give you - our love. All my love, Mom."

She was right. He was angry at her. It was April 1, 1986, one day after he had been put into a drug rehabilitation program called Straight. He felt trapped. He felt betrayed. He felt furious. But when he was done reading the letter, he folded it carefully and kept it nearby as he slept.

The next day he read it again, and the following day again. It was with him as he went through endless counseling sessions. It was with him as weeks in Straight turned into months. And though ripped in places from folding and unfolding, it was still with him a year later, on the night of April 10, 1987, when his mother hugged him tightly, smiled with relief and whispered to him, "I love you." A remorseful return

He made it. Three hundred seventy-six days after the start of his rehabilitation, Paul [REDACTED] became one of the success stories of Straight. You could see it in his eyes. They were bright. You could see it in his face, which beamed. A year after entering the program, he was free of drugs and hopeful of staying that way.

"Some people do it on their own, some people do it with short-term programs, some people do it with long-term programs," he said. "I did it this way, and I made it."

"This way" was Straight's way, a program as long-term as they come. Month after month in Straight, a young person's self-concept is torn down as low as it can go and then rebuilt through intensive peer counseling. It is a wearying program, agonizing and tearful. Paul made it. But he almost didn't.

From his first day in, he was a sullen and troubled young man, and after several months he simply fell apart. There had been signs it was coming. He had gotten into fistfights. He had found staples on the floor and used them to carve long scratches in the underside of his forearm. There was one stretch during which he settled down long enough to make some progress, but then he ran away from the program, explaining later that he needed to vanish for a while from its incessant demands.

He came back remorseful, but in fact he was no better. He fought and screamed and was sent off for psychiatric observation. He returned remorseful again, but soon he was back to his old ways. He taunted people. He threw things. So Straight officials, not knowing what else to do, sent him home.

That was in late August 1986, five months after Paul had first entered Straight. He went home gladly, but then it dawned on him that he was 16 years old and out of options. He had withdrawn from school to enter Straight; now he was on the verge of abandoning Straight as well.

He sprawled on the couch and watched TV. He fought with his mother Julie, who insisted on towing him along wherever she went. He fought with his father Bill, and his sister Jodie.

For three days he brooded, and then, realizing how badly things were disintegrating, he asked his mother to call Straight and see if they would give him yet another chance.

Maybe, Straight answered, saying the staff would need to discuss it. Call back later.

Three more days went by. Then, on Friday, Sept. 5, Straight said yes, he could come back, and the following morning, deerlike in his nervousness, Paul returned.

He was put back on First Phase, as if he were entering the program for the first time. He was patted down. He was strip-searched. He gave a urine sample and swore in a signed statement that he wouldn't misbehave. He was led by his belt loop down a hallway and into the room where the others in Straight were gathered. "Hi Paul," they yelled in unison. One young man hugged him, and then another one did, and then he sat down and put his hand in the air to be called on to talk.

To anyone watching who had seen him before, he seemed a different young man entirely. He began trying so hard to succeed that he seemed on the verge of bursting. It was as if his deciding to come back, rather than his parents' pressuring him to do so, had made all the difference in the world. "I just made up my mind I wanted to complete the program," he would explain later. "I got tired of the old ways."

There was no stopping him.

He got through First Phase in 21 days; his first time around it had taken 50.

He flew through Second Phase in eight days and, during one rap session, surprised more than a few people when the discussion turned to goals:

"I always wanted to be a drug dealer," one boy said.

"I always said I wanted to die high and in bed with a girl," said another.

"One of my long-term goals," said a third, "was to burn in hell or something. Another, I talked about going to Disney World and doing acid or something. Another was to stay high the rest of my life."

"I got a long-term goal," Paul said. "I want to be a staff member."

People looked closely to see if he was kidding. He wasn't.

In Third Phase, which took him 21 days to complete, he returned to "Straight school," a classroom within the building staffed by a Pinellas County teacher.

In Fourth Phase, which took him 94 days, he made plans to attend a vocational-technical school in Tampa.

Then came Fifth Phase and the start of his return to the real world. He had never been this far before.

He began attending vo-tech from morning until early afternoon, returning to Straight in time for the evening rap session. Straight continued to be a shelter for him, but his hours at school were something else. Kids would come back from lunch with beer on their breath or glassy-eyed from drugs, and he would see them and remember how it was for him.

Then, during a week-long vacation with his family in Detroit, he found himself at a hockey game, standing in line next to a man who was smoking some pot. The smoke drifted over and around him, thick and familiar. He moved away, but again, he couldn't help but remember.

Then, in bed one night, he had a dream.

"I saw myself getting high with other people. I saw myself sitting there smoking pot. It was like, This feels great! I knew what I was doing was wrong, though. Then, when I woke up, I didn't know if I had done it or not. I woke up and I thought I was high."

Half-asleep, he sat up in the dark, trying to get his bearings. Within seconds he realized it had just been a dream, but for those few moments, he was a petrified young man, afraid he had thrown away everything he had been working toward. He felt sick. Then relieved. Then sick again.

In early March, after he had been on Fifth Phase almost 50 days, he was accepted for staff training.

On April 2, 1987, he turned 17. He had been free from drugs for 368 days.

Eight days later, Straight officials decided the time had come for him to graduate. The graduation

in drug rehabilitation, the most difficult thing to define is success.

"There are so many definitions of what success really is, I don't think anybody has a handle on it," says Harry Moffet, a program specialist with Florida's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.

"Success isn't clearly defined," agrees Matthew Glissen, founder of a Miami rehabilitation program called Village South. "Some of our most successful cases are the ones who didn't complete the program, and some of our most dismal failures are the ones who did."

"By no means," Glissen says, "should anyone equate the completion of a program with success."

At Straight, success is declared only when a person has remained free from drugs at least 12 months after he has left the program. The cutoff isn't arbitrary; during those 12 months, temptations return in force and willpower can easily break down. More than a few times since Paul entered the program, graduates of Straight came back for help, returning in far worse shape than they were in the first time they entered.

Technically, then, Paul wouldn't be a true success until he had completed a year of aftercare, including weekly meetings at Narcotics Anonymous. Yet looking at him on the evening of Friday, April 10, it was hard to think of him as anything else. By any standard, he was a changed young man. Straight doesn't work for everybody, but at that point it had worked for him.

He had kicked drugs. He had returned to school. He had gone from warring with his parents to arguing with them only occasionally. His face glowed so much it mesmerized.

"I would have been nothing," he said, thinking about how he might have ended up without treatment. "I know I would have been shooting up cocaine - one of my old druggie friends was doing it a week before I went into the program, and if I was higher I think I would have done it, too. I would have been the same old Paul, getting high every day, doing drugs, nothing else."

Instead, he said, "I know myself now. I know how I am, what I need, what I want. I like myself a lot more. I basically have myself back."

Sitting in a blue chair near the others in the program, he watched the long line of parents begin filing in for the weekly Friday night meeting. Because he was in training to join the staff, he wore a tie, and his sneakers had been replaced by dress shoes.

He didn't know he would be graduating.

He knew he was close, but he didn't know when exactly it was going to happen. His parents did know, and they showed up for the meeting with five friends and relatives. Smiling, they walked in.

Paul saw them. And then he knew.

He watched them as they sat down. He grew teary. He fidgeted in his seat while the rest of the parents took their seats, and then, when his name was called out along with three other people who would be graduating that night as well, he rushed up to the front of the room with a smile that kept growing wider.

His family rushed up there, too, and when they got to him, they crowded around him in a knot.

They took turns embracing him. They took turns telling them how proud they were.

"I love you," his father said.

"I love you very much," his mother said.

"I never thought I'd make it," Paul said, laughing.

Holding onto each other, they began walking out while everyone else in the room - all the parents, all their children - applauded. Some of them cried, a mixture of happiness for the [REDACTED] and hope that they would make it, too. Several

young men shook Paul's hand as he went by them, and one young man ran up and hugged him so hard, both of them almost tumbled to the floor. They laughed and slapped each other on the back, and Paul kept walking, turning around for one last look just as he got to the door.

He swept his eyes over the room, a room he knew as well as anything he had ever known in his life. He looked at the rows of blue plastic chairs where he had been sitting 10 hours a day, six days a week, for more than a year. He looked at the floor where he had been tackled when he tried to run away, and at the doors he had been trying to reach. He looked at the faces of the young people he was leaving behind.

Those faces - those were the most haunting thing of all.

From the day Paul entered the program until that moment, 233 people had been admitted to Straight, and in all of them there was a thread of continuity that was nothing short of amazing.

Like Paul, they had all come in scowling. Like him, they had sat in silence for a few days and then, tentatively, begun to talk. They had looked sheepish the first time they raised a hand into the air to be called on to speak, but then the sheepishness would disappear and their hands would become a blur. Smiles would creep in. Then tears. Then boredom. Then flatness. Then more tears. Then, if all went well, more smiles at the end.

On and on it went like this, month after month. Not everyone made it: Some left after a few days, some after a few weeks. Some left on their own, some were asked to leave. But empty chairs fill quickly at Straight, and the process continued on:

``This is Dan. He's done pot, alcohol, acid, mushrooms, cocaine, ups and downs.``

``Love you, Dan ...``

``This is John. He's done pot, alcohol, inhalants, acid, cocaine, prescriptions and PCP.``

``Love you, John ...``

``This is Rick. He's done pot, alcohol, LSD, PCP, hash ...``

Each time, the face may have been slightly different from the one that preceded it - blond hair instead of brown, brown eyes instead of blue - but in one other way it was the same face again and again. It was always young.

Paul stepped through the door. He was 6 inches taller than he had been when he came into the program. He had gained 35 pounds.

Another person who had graduated rushed up to him. She was jumping up and down. She was crying. She grabbed onto him. She hugged him. She couldn't hold still.

``We're out!`` she said. ``All right!``

Out.

It was cool. The sun was down. Palms rustled in the evening breeze.

Paul had a question:

Some people were going out for coffee and dessert. They were all graduates of the program. Could he go?

Julie looked at her son. Seventeen years and eight days before, he had come into the world pink and screaming, a healthy baby boy. Drowsily, she had cradled him in her arms, and then had listened happily as her doctor sang him a lullaby.

She had felt so much hope then.

And now, she felt so much hope again.

``What time will you be home?`` she asked.

``Probably around 1,`` he said.

``All right,`` she said.

``All right!`` he said.

He got in a car with two other people.

They rolled down the windows and turned on the radio.

They pulled out of the parking lot, laughing.

They made a right, speeded up and disappeared around a bend, one more carload of kids out on a Friday night. 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, CHERIE [REDACTED]; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, FRED [REDACTED], (2); BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, (2); Caption: Paul [REDACTED] decides which of his former Straight classmates may speak during rap session; Paul [REDACTED] gets a kiss from his mother; Paul [REDACTED] and his parents; Paul [REDACTED] in 1986 when he was admitted into Straight Inc.; Paul [REDACTED] in 1987 on; Caption: graduation day from Straight Inc.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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