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Dirt & the diplomat

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It's hardly an even fight. In one corner, Mel Sembler: shopping center developer, former finance chairman of the Republican National Committee, former ambassador to Italy and Australia. Friend of President Bush and his father. In the other corner, Richard Bradbury: molested by a fireman at age 11, unemployed, target of lawsuits for failure to make rent and credit card payments. Just turned 41, lives with his parents.

The wealthy, politically connected developer has it all over the jobless guy who can't remember the last time he paid his taxes. Except for this intangible: Bradbury is on a mission. And he's obsessed.

For 10 years he combed through the garbage outside Sembler's home on Treasure Island, meticulously cataloging little treasures he discovered, including documents with the ambassador's seal and presidential schedules complete with aircraft tail numbers.

Three years ago, Bradbury's garbage runs hit what for him was the mother lode: Sembler's discarded penile pump.

Thoughtful soul that he is, Bradbury offered the item on eBay:

"Pump, one of a kind formerly owned by current United States Ambassador to Italy ..." Minimum bid: \$300,000.

The Semblers filed a lawsuit that called Bradbury's actions "so dark and fringe as to outrage common sensibilities" and "an invasion into the sanctity of our home and our bedroom."

It's been three years, and the outgunned jobless guy is more than holding his own: Sembler offered to drop the suit if Bradbury would keep his distance. Bradbury said no.

"Anybody else would have cut and run. I'm not backing down."

The fight goes back more than 20 years, to a massive warehouse in Pinellas Park with blue plastic chairs and too many peanut butter sandwiches.

There, at a **drug** treatment center called **Straight, Inc.**, 17-year-old Richard Bradbury landed in a world that he says was part Lord of the Flies, part Abu Ghraib prison.

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Sembler and his wife, Betty, helped found Straight after they found out one of their sons was smoking pot, according to news reports.

In a book published this year, *Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids*, journalist Maia Szalavitz contends that dehumanizing practices at prisons and mental hospitals have been repackaged as therapy and sold to parents desperate to control their children. The first two chapters feature Straight, and Richard Bradbury.

Bradbury says a fireman molested him when he was 11, abuse that continued for three years with a high school principal and other men the fireman brought around. He dropped out of school but says he was not hooked on **drugs** when his adoptive parents brought him to Straight.

Other teens further along in the program forced him to sit up in a plastic chair for 10 to 12 hours a day, he says. If he leaned back, he was thrown to the floor and others sat on his arms, legs and chest. Forbidden to use the bathroom, he would soil his clothes. He says he was beaten.

He graduated, joined the staff and inflicted beatings on other teens. He left Straight in 1985, after he said he learned other counselors were sexually abusing teens and tried to report it, only to be told to shut up or be returned to the program as a client.

Bradbury said he decided to break into the Straight facility on Gandy Boulevard in an attempt to steal medical files of Straight's clients to prove his allegations. The night of Jan. 26, 1988, armed with a nine-point burglary plan he called "Fair Play," Bradbury dropped in on a rope hung through the skylight. He heard sirens and ran out the back door empty-handed.

He turned himself in and got five years probation for burglary. He was ordered to stay away from the Semblers.

In 1989, former President George Bush appointed Sembler ambassador to Australia and another Straight co-founder, Joe Zappala, ambassador to Spain. Neither had diplomatic experience, but each had donated more than \$100,000 to Bush's 1988 presidential campaign.

In 1989, Bradbury organized an anti-Straight group with chapters around the country. Dozens of former clients filed claims, alleging kidnapping, beating and other abuses.

A 1993 Florida Inspector General audit found that despite "a propensity for abuse or excessive force," Straight kept getting licensed: "It appears that pressure may have been generated by Ambassador Sembler and other state senators."

Its enrollment dwindling, Straight was dissolved in 1994.

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Fast forward a decade. Sembler had developed or managed more than 100 shopping centers nationwide, including BayWalk and Crossroads shopping centers in St. Petersburg and Centro Ybor and University Plaza in Tampa.

With Straight long gone, Bradbury had fixated on Sembler. A few times he picketed outside his home on Treasure Island and his business on Central Avenue. He went through Sembler's trash, as often as once a month, as he did with other people and businesses with whom he had disagreements.

Sembler had been named U.S. ambassador to Italy in 2001, and he and Betty moved to Rome.

Back home on Treasure Island, the maid threw out a device that Sembler's urologist had prescribed him some 13 years earlier, after surgery for prostate cancer. It was a penile pump, to treat erectile dysfunction.

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Semler had kept his prostate cancer private. He had even declined to make an appearance for a prostate cancer organization.

"It's just a private matter," he said in a recent deposition. "I didn't think it was anything to discuss with people."

But there it was, in the St. Petersburg Times classifieds: A tiny ad ran May 3, 2003, in the Antiques and Collectibles section, between a 1918 piano ad and a moving sale:

"Pump, used, one of a kind. White in color, formerly owned by US Ambassador to Italy w/instructions."

In a letter July 10, 2003, the Semblers' attorney demanded that Bradbury sign an agreement to leave the Semblers alone for good - or they would come after everything he had.

"Plainly put Mr. Bradbury," wrote attorney Leonard Englander, "it would be our intention to have you become the prey and not the hunter, as you have fancied yourself to be these past several years."

The letter outlined the Semblers' potential claims: intentional infliction of emotional distress and violation of privacy for publishing a private fact.

Bring it on, Bradbury wrote back. He welcomed a lawsuit to "open Pandora's box" and expose what happened at Straight:

"I will give anything of my life for the victims of Straight," he wrote, "in any legal effort to expose the dishonorable Melvin Semler and all his actions including but not limited to the fraudulent organized child abuse Straight fraud centers."

Bradbury hired Thomas McGowan, a \$300-an-hour First Amendment lawyer (who has done work for the St. Petersburg Times).

In a letter July 16, 2003, McGowan told the Semblers that Bradbury would leave them alone if they paid him \$700,000, half of which would go to a nonprofit devoted to the ethical treatment of youth.

Bradbury took a picture of the pump on top of Englander's "prey" letter, and used the photo to advertise the device on eBay.

He researched other unusual items for sale, including Monica Lewinsky's semen-stained dress and an Elvis tooth, and started the bidding at \$300,000. He pledged to donate 25 percent to help Straight victims.

Which prompted the Semblers to say enough is enough. Enough extortion, enough humiliation.

They filed suit. Circuit Judge Walt Logan signed a temporary injunction ordering Bradbury to leave the Semblers alone and return the pump.

Bradbury said he didn't know where it was. He said he had given his box of Semler stuff to a guy in Michigan. Somebody named Ken.

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Each side would get to question the other under oath. Bradbury was deposed first.

On Dec. 7, 2004, for six hours. Semler's attorney asked him about his trash digging habits, lawsuits he has been a party to and his spotty job record as co-owner of companies that conduct employee background checks.

The next day, a rattled Bradbury checked into a counseling center and got a prescription for Xanax.

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McGowan asked to delay Bradbury's not-yet-completed deposition. A psychologist, Sidney Merin, met with Bradbury and said he suffered from paranoia and post-traumatic stress syndrome triggered by abuse at Straight. Merin said he did not think Bradbury would harm anyone.

The psychologist the Semblers hired, Michael Cohen, said Bradbury suffered from schizophrenia, paranoid type, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. He said Bradbury "does represent a somewhat above-average risk of committing a violent act."

After eight months of counseling, Bradbury was ready to conclude his deposition. He testified that he didn't hate the Semblers; he had forgiven them years before.

Going through their garbage, he said, he took pains to shred documents of "national security concern" and items like Sembler's haircut appointments at Beachcombers, "so it would not endanger him and it would not fall into inappropriate hands."

Englander asked about a reference in the newspaper ad that included a line: "bettyfac use only."

"At the time you wrote the ad, you intended for people to read the ad and associate Betty Sembler's face with a penis pump, did you not?" Englander asked.

Bradbury said he might have included the nonsensical line to attract attention.

"I do not recollect my intention at the time," he said, "but I can tell you that, you know, if their feelings are hurt over this, I'm - I'm - I'm sorry to hear that."

Bradbury testified that he never expected Sembler to get caught up in his shenanigans.

"One of the things I recollect thinking was I thought that (Sembler) would be smart enough to realize that this was a publicity stunt and not even to respond to it."

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All these years and they had never met - until seven weeks ago, when Sembler sat for his deposition.

He wore a suit. Bradbury had on his best dress clothes, gray cargo pants and long-sleeve shirt buttoned at his neck. He had removed his silver hoop earrings and plastered down a patch of bleached curls atop his head.

They shook hands.

"Oh, you're the guy I'm suing," Bradbury recalls Sembler saying. "I bet this is costing you a lot of money."

Bradbury said nothing. He thought how strange it was that Sembler seemed so pleasant. But once McGowan began the questioning, Sembler's frustration tumbled out.

"Mr. Bradbury's been an irritant and he's been distressing to my family, not only personally, and to my wife, but to my children," Sembler testified. "I've told my family one of these days I wouldn't be surprised if a bomb wasn't placed in my mailbox by this outrageous behavior of this young man."

He said Bradbury was intelligent but "not a normal human being." He said Bradbury had trespassed all these years; the garbage bin was on their property, not in the public right-of-way at the end of the driveway - as Bradbury remembered - where it would be legal for anyone to go through it.

It especially upset Betty Sembler. "I'm under severe emotional distress," she said in her deposition. She had lost sleep

over it, cried about it and, afraid of Bradbury, changed the way she entered her home, making sure to look around when she got out of her car.

"She's like many women," Sembler testified, "she's emotional and she's - this man is very distressing, particularly recently. Since his antics with his disclosing that, you know, he's been coming on the property for 10 years and then advertising this medical device ... he's gotten out of control now."

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In three years, Bradbury has paid McGowan \$40,000 to \$45,000 in legal fees, plus court reporting and other costs. He says he borrowed money from his parents and friends, got some from an anti-Straight network and drew on the proceeds he got in an unrelated dispute that he cannot talk about.

More than a year ago, the Semblers offered to drop their case as long as the injunction ordering Bradbury to stay away from them and their garbage remained in place. Bradbury refused.

"He wants his day in court," McGowan said.

Why Sembler?

"He's very unapologetic for anything that happened at Straight," McGowan said. "And because of that and because he's a high-profile guy, he gets to be the face of Straight."

Sembler would not be interviewed for this story, but his profile on his company Web site speaks to his pride in the program: "In 1976, Sembler and his wife Betty founded STRAIGHT, an adolescent **drug** treatment program. During its 17 years of existence, STRAIGHT successfully graduated more than 12,000 young people nationwide from its remarkable program."

McGowan says that putting a cancer patient's medical device on eBay is not something he would do, but he defends Bradbury's right to do it.

"I don't think they ever thought he'd do anything but cave," McGowan said. "It was two miscalculations and now lots of money later, everybody's got their heels dug in."

Englander acknowledged that he and the Semblers expected that their "prey" letter would make Bradbury give up. "This guy's off the charts. It's spooky what he does," Englander said. "It's scary, movielike ... this is just not a normal person."

Why settle? Bradbury craved attention for the cause, and got it. Articles about the purloined pump have been published in the St. Petersburg Times and the **Washington Post**, and there's a blog called Pumpgate, with links to court documents and quotes from the players.

Bradbury never married, his most trusted companion his 7-year-old cocker spaniel, Gumbo, who is dying of cancer. Other than his parents, he has only himself, and he says the case has sapped him of that. After the trial, he says he's ready to move on.

"I accomplished what I set out to do, which was to draw attention to what they did to us kids," Bradbury said. "But emotionally and financially, I'm finished. It's ruined me."

The trial is scheduled for February. But first, the Semblers want Bradbury held in contempt of court because he never complied with the judge's 3-year-old order to return the pump.

Bradbury says he is searching for Ken, who he says attended Straight in Michigan, where he was not allowed to use the bathroom, peed his pants and had his face rubbed in urine. Bradbury had the operator of an anti-Straight Web site post a

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message and the injunction, which says the pump must be returned.

Still no word from Ken.

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Bradbury's deposition

In this excerpt from Richard Bradbury's deposition, attorney Leonard Englander asks him to acknowledge that he wanted to embarrass the Semblers - at any cost. Tom McGowan is Bradbury's lawyer:

Englander: You just didn't care what the words were; you just wanted the outrageous nature of the ad to prompt somebody to think about Straight, irrespective of the impact on Betty Sembler?

Bradbury: Ok, well at the time, I did want it to prompt people to think about

Straight; and I probably did not think about her.

Englander: Did not care.

Bradbury: Hmm. I would have to disagree with that. I think I might have cared - like I said, I don't - I don't hate these people.

Englander: Similar to the way a terrorist blows himself up and kills other people. He doesn't hate them; he's just trying to get his point across.

Bradbury: Which terrorist are you talking about?

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