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Straight Inc. renews the fight to separate teens from drugs

By PATRICK TYLER
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Pinellas County's latest effort to get its sons and daughters off non-addictive drugs will open in less than three weeks to what one organizer calls the "backlog of desperation" among the parents of teenagers.

To lead the effort, a citizens group has hired James E. Hartz, who traded his top post at a Georgia training center for the mentally retarded for a crack at some of Pinellas County's drug-prone children.

Straight Inc., a non-profit drug treatment program, opens Sept. 1 with Hartz as its director.

For Hartz, 26, the complexities of drug rehabilitation will be a new experience. Straight's backers said they chose the youthful redhead because of the administrative experience he gained while at his \$11,150-a-year job as director of Richmond County (Ga.) Training Center for the retarded.

"I'm still relatively new to the drug field. It's something I'll grow into," Hartz said at his still sparsely furnished office in the two-story building at 700 43rd St. S where the program will be based.

HIS APPROACH will be simple, he says: "We think we can teach kids that being high on life is more important than being high on drugs — that's it in a nutshell."

That lesson will cost parents \$500 per child. However, Straight plans to take non-paying, court-referred clients with hopes that the state will reimburse it for the service.

At full capacity, Straight hopes to handle 200 to 300 clients at a time.

Hartz, and Straight Inc., are the product of six months of around-the-table discussions by a group of Pinellas County physicians, businessmen and government officials. They were

brought together, they say, by the common desire to give the community something it has not had since the last teenage-rehabilitation program, The Seed, closed its doors in October.

Straight's backers don't want the new program associated with The Seed, which takes its name from the biblical assertion that faith "as (small as) a grain of mustard seed" can move mountains, and presumably, cure a drug problem.

THE ORGANIZERS, most of whom are listed in Straight's charter, according to Hartz, are: Leon H. Sellers, veterinarian; R. Carl Garby, surgeon; Fred H. Kenfield, funeral director and former chairman of the Suncoast Anti-Communist Forum; Ray Waymire, former director of the City Office of Crime Prevention, where organizers often met; Mel Sembler, real estate developer; Ted M. Anderson, lumber company president who donated the 43rd Street building to Straight; Robert E. Chapin, drug company president; Herbert Goldstein, clinical psychologist on the staff of the Child and Developmental Center; Thomas E. Wykoff, Clearwater plumbing contractor; and Arthur Bauknight, an insurance agent.

"We don't want a warmed up Seed," says Bauknight. "We decided to investigate various drug-rehabilitation programs because we had nothing here."

When Straight opens, it will have been nearly a year since Art Barker abandoned the Pinellas County branch of The Seed, the state's largest drug rehabilitation program. From the day it opened in May 1973, The Seed was simultaneously blessed as "saving kids' lives," and damned as a "brainwashing" factory that turned out "robot-like" graduates.

Whatever it was, the people at Straight say they are taking a different

approach.

"I happen to feel that you can communicate with an individual without degrading him, humiliating him and without depriving him of all his uniqueness," says Hartz, who holds a master's degree in psychology from West Georgia College at Carrollton.

Hartz says "cussing and swearing" in therapy sessions to force clients to bare their true feelings — one of the criticisms of The Seed — is the product of "untrained, unsupervised and unqualified staff — it's not going to happen here."

FACED WITH AN evasive, drug-abusing teenager in therapy, Hartz said his staff will use a positive approach to extract inner feelings. ("Man, you're connin'. When you get through all the bull, we'll get down to changin'," Hartz gave as an example.)

But Hartz emphasized that Straight "is not going to be a country club. It's hard . . . getting kids off something they like."

Whatever it's going to be, it is going to cost about \$130,000 to operate during the first year. When its backers announced the program at the end of July, Sellers, a principal organizer, said Straight hoped to avoid government financing.

But within two weeks, Hartz announced that Straight has accepted a \$47,394 Law Enforcement Assistance Administration grant funneled through the Pinellas Metropolitan Criminal Justice Planning Council.

Hartz says the funds will be used as "startup" money, to get the program through the first year. After that, he said, the program will rely on client fees and community donations to stay afloat.

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— JAMES E.
HARTZ

HARTZ WOULD NOT disclose what Straight's organizers offered him in salary to lure him to the program. "I'm going to pay my staff well, and I'm going to be paid well," he said, adding that \$90,000 to \$90,000 of the \$130,000 budget is designated as salary funds for him and a staff of six or seven "para-professionals."

Those staffers, he said, will be drawn from the ranks of graduates of The Seed and other rehabilitation programs. Hartz said he hopes eventually to hire bachelor-degree-level psychologists and sociologists to strengthen the staff.

With such a staff, Hartz said, he is developing a two-week client program, centered around three therapy sessions during the 12-hour day clients will remain within the walls of Straight. Hartz said the program will include the flexibility to extend itself for teenagers who require longer stays, and for those who are allowed to remain in school.

When the daily sessions end at 9 p.m., the plan is that most clients will enter foster homes to keep them away from the daily routine in which their drug habit blossomed.

The homes will be those of Straight graduates and will be designed to strengthen "drug-free" living attitudes, Hartz said. There, clients will write a daily "moral-inventory report" on their progress, according to Goldstein, who compiled the program's objectives from the organizational meetings.

PARENTS ALSO WILL be asked to participate in their child's rehabilitation. "If you want a youngster to get off drugs," Hartz said, "the

family has to be involved."

Some of the goals set forth in Goldstein's program outline may be dropped in favor of Hartz' emphasis on preparing the 14- to 18-year-old clientele to re-enter and cope with youthful society, Hartz said. One such Goldstein proposal called for Straight graduates to form a "graduate society" in which "pins and medallions with a society logo can be designed and emphasis can be placed on wearing the medallion or pin with pride."

Hartz said he doesn't want Straight graduates to feel isolated when they return to school, jobs and friends. Critics of the Seed program claimed that program fostered such isolation.

"We want kids who can effectively relate to the environment they're going back to, not to totally alienate them. We don't want to develop robots and weirdos."

Though he acknowledges that he has had no direct experience in drug treatment programs (he said what experience he has comes from working with the mentally retarded, where, he says, there is a high incidence of drug abuse), Hartz thinks Straight's formula will cure the drug habits of 50 to 70 per cent of its clients.

And, its supporters think, Straight's formula is already generating enthusiasm among parents with drug-abuse problems in their families. Bauknight says he knows of 15 families who are considering the program.

"I don't think there's any question that there's going to be people here when we open the door Sept. 1," said Bauknight's wife, Lila. Added her husband: "There's a backlog of desperation right now."