

St. Petersburg Times

Florida's Best Newspaper

56 PAGES ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA, MONDAY, MARCH 7, 1977

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

city AND state

■ ST. PETERSBURG
■ THE SUNCOAST ■ FLORIDA

MONDAY, MARCH 7, 1977

section **B**

A new place for young to 'get straight'

By DAVID M. SNYDER
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Call her Alice. She is 15, with short, bouncy blond hair and a physique that Mother Nature has just begun to rearrange. She's yesterday's tomboy; tomorrow's woman.

The program believes that confession is good for the soul. So, in front of 200 people — parents and peers — she begins a ritual:

"My name is Alice. I'm 15. I've done pot and alcohol for about two years. I've been here eight days."

She talks on, her face contorting and her voice cracking more and more as she tells about fights with her parents, beating up her brother, pressure from her "druggie" friends, bad grades . . .

" . . . I was unhappy all the time," she says. "So, I tried to find happiness with guys — a bunch of different guys that I didn't even know. It didn't work. They were just one-night stands."

When she says "one-night stands," her composure disintegrates. Her face turns deep red with shame-rage. Tears pour down her cheeks. Silence surrounds her quiet sobs and a muffled cough from someone in the group seems as loud as a

Straight Inc. appears to be far more open to public scrutiny than The Seed, which generally refused to disclose details of its finances. Hartz, in fact, readily offers visitors a chance to see the organization's books.

The program is divided into phases, beginning with the complete separation of the child from past environment and progressing as the child gradually returns to home, school and society.

Those who violate a long list of rules, run away, or fail to make acceptable progress are held back until they do it right.

PARENTS ARE not allowed to talk to their children during the first phase of the program, which lasts from two weeks to a month. They see their children only across a crowded room at the center on Park Street North of Tyrone Boulevard during "open meetings" twice weekly at which emotions run high.

"When you were born you were the joy of my life," a woman told her son, who stood across the room amid his fellow oldcomers. "It was the same when you were growing up," she said, "but then you started taking drugs and something changed.



cheeks. Silence surrounds her quiet sobs and a muffled cough from someone in the group seems as loud as a gunshot.

Tom, the staff member, sits facing her — inscrutable behind tinted granny glasses. He sits on his hands, his thin shoulders hunched forward.

When Alice stops sobbing, he speaks — softly, gently — reassuring and rebuilding her confidence

Alice has just begun the virtually inexorable process of getting straight, at Straight Inc., Pinellas County's latest effort to get its sons and daughters off nonaddictive drugs.

Like most of the approximately 130 teenagers in the program, she did not volunteer to get straight — that was decided by her parents or the courts.

She is in a totally new environment — out of school, away from old friends and her parents — leading, for the present, a highly regimented life.

She will learn a new vocabulary to supplement the street-slang she uses to describe drugs.

LIKE MOST newcomers, she resents the loss of her freedom.

Pete (not his real name) is 16. He has been straight for 68 days. He did not volunteer to get straight either.

"Before, when I was a druggie, I thought freedom was doing what I wanted to do, but I was a slave to making other people happy," he says.

"Now, I'm free to do what I want to do."



Mother: "When you were born you were the joy of my life. It was the same when you were growing up. But then you started taking drugs and something changed. Now, thanks to these people and thanks to you, you're the joy of my life like you were before. I love you."

Son: "I love you too, Mom."

said, "but then you started taking drugs and something changed.

"Now, thanks to these people and thanks to you, you're the joy of my life like you were before. I love you."

Beaming, the boy said, "I love you too, Mom."

IF CLOTHING styles of their parents are any indication of their socio-economic status, the teenagers in Straight — almost all white — come from all levels.

Like reformed alcoholics, Straight clients are told to stay away from their old druggie friends and maintain a "cordial distance" until they can handle temptation.

This often leads to animosity and resentment among teenagers who still are part of the drug scene, and, as a result, Hartz expects controversy.

"We're going to have an impact on the community and people are going to say bad things about us," he said.

Pressure from those in the drug scene already has been felt. Staff members asked that their last names be withheld because "we still have old drug-using friends that don't appreciate us."

One overriding characteristic of the program is that there is no laxity on moral issues.

Besides strict rules such as no boy-girl relationships, no drug hangouts or friends who use drugs, and no telephone calls for several months, "We have a saying here that 'what's right is right and what's wrong is wrong,'" Hartz said.

WHO DETERMINES what is right and wrong?

"Before, when I was a druggie, I thought freedom was doing what I wanted to do, but I was a slave to making other people happy," he says. "Now, I'm free to do what I want to do."

Pete is an oldcomer.

Straight, like its highly-controversial predecessor, The Seed, is trying to put a dent in widespread use of non-addictive drugs by local teenagers. It administers a heavy dose of traditional values to replace drug use and other behavior that parents and, presumably, society find unacceptable.

It was launched last September by local professionals and businessmen to fill the gap left when The Seed closed its Pinellas County branch in 1975.

THEIR STATED aim was not to revive The Seed, which was simultaneously blessed as "saving kids' lives" and damned as a "brainwashing" factory that turned out "robot-like" graduates.

Nevertheless, Straight — according to Circuit Judge Jack A. Page, who has placed several teenagers in the program and calls it "excellent" — seems to have the same effect, without the "pressure tactics."

"I haven't had the kids revolt like they did with The Seed," he said. "And there have been almost no complaints from parents and kids."

"It is an attitude program, not just a drug program. It teaches self-respect and traditional values and gives teenagers a strong sense of responsibility. It would be good for all types of delinquents, not just drug abusers."

James E. Hartz, Straight's director, who has a master's degree in psychology, calls it "the most fantastic therapeutic system I've ever seen."

HARTZ DIRECTS a staff of "para-professionals" — mostly Seed graduates in their late teens paid \$6,200 a year — and volunteers. The staff is touchy about comparisons of their program with The Seed, and they take pains to show visitors that there are "no whips and chains in the closet."

Boys and girls, 12 to 18, are eligible for Straight if they use drugs and if their parents agree to participate and sign a consent form, Hartz says.

The "minimum donation" for the four-month program is \$350, but no one will be turned away for lack of money, Hartz said.

Straight Inc. is a private nonprofit organization. Its \$130,000 budget for the current fiscal year is aided by \$50,000 in federal money. Straight Inc. is applying for another \$50,000 in federal funds.

have a saying here that what's right is right and what's wrong is wrong," Hartz said.

WHO DETERMINES what is right and wrong?

"We do," Hartz says. Drugs and pre-marital sex "because we've seen how it causes problems for the girls" are wrong, and obeying parents and doing well in school are right, he says, giving examples.

These standards are fully explained to parents, and those who want "the easy way out" are told to take their children elsewhere, he says.

One of the most effective tools to impart these values to teenagers is peer-group pressure. There were complaints that The Seed abused this tactic. Hartz says Straight uses positive pressure.

✓ ✓ ✓

Frank, 17, has been in the program three days.

Clean-cut and articulate, he seems more mature than most of the teenagers. He says he has used pot and alcohol and other drugs, but "I don't need them."

No one in the program will listen to his side, he says, and besides, it's all phony because the others "would do or say anything just to get out of here."

He doesn't want to get straight.

Unruffled, Tom asks the group "How many of you want to help Frank get straight?"

A hundred hands fly into the air.

Frank is unmoved, and he tries to defend himself. But Helen, another staff member, shouts out: "Don't worry Frank, you'll be on the staff here someday."

With that, the whole room erupts in laughter.

Flushed and near tears, Frank retreats to his chair.

✓ ✓ ✓

"He didn't know how to handle it — all that caring," Hartz says later.

If there is pressure there also is support from the group. A youth facing a difficult confrontation with his parents is not alone. The Straight veterans hold his hands, steady his quaking shoulders, encourage him to reveal his feelings and comfort him with "we love you" when he cries.

See STRAIGHT, 2-B

Straight

from 1-B

The result is that the "Straights" are truly evangelistic about the program. Tom does not lie when he tells a girl who has twice run away that the group will help her get **straight** "whether you want it or not."

Although the program has produced only one graduate so far, there have been few immediate failures among the 130 teenagers now enrolled, Hartz said.

Randy, the graduate, says Straight is "great — it gave me a

chance to start over. It really helped me."

He says his school work has improved and he is a happier person.

"They didn't force me to do a thing, not even get my hair cut. They like you to get your hair cut, but they don't force you," he said.

Circuit Judge Jack E. Dadswell, who works with Page in Pinellas County's juvenile court, supports **Straight**.

Known for dispensing "jail therapy" to delinquents, Dadswell says Straight is one of the few rehabilitation programs he trusts.

He puts it simply: "Straight is probably the most intensive behavior modification program I know of."

... Tom tells Alice that everyone in the room is going to help her get straight. Then, to complete the ritual, he asks; "Do you have any goals? Tell us what you're going to do here."

Alice pauses for a moment. Then, when she speaks, it is not clear whether she is asking or telling.

"I guess I've got to get my attitude worked on some more," she says.

Language of drugs

Alcohol: A drug, no different than marijuana, cocaine or heroin.

Con: To fool, deceive, pull the wool over someone's eyes; what druggies do.

Druggie: A teenager who uses drugs.

Feeling bad: A description of a druggie.

Feeling good: A description of someone who is straight.

Newcomer: A recent entrant to the program.

Object: What one druggie is to another druggie.

Oldcomer: A teenager in the advanced stages of the program.

Pot: Marijuana.

Program, the: Straight Inc.

Straight: A description of someone who does not use drugs, and, in a wider sense, a traditional goal-oriented attitude toward life.