

Nominee explains mission of Straight

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Mel Sembler, planning to go halfway around the world to be the U.S. ambassador to Australia, spent time Monday telling a Senate committee about a drug treatment organization he started in St. Petersburg.

Sembler, a St. Petersburg shopping center developer, described Straight Inc. as an organization of "children helping children" and "families helping families." In all, he said, 10,000 children have graduated from the organization since 1976.

"We are known as a tough program, but when Mom and Dad get involved, they want it tough," Sembler told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Questions about the controversial organization arose last week during a confirmation hearing for Joseph Zappala, a St. Petersburg man who is President Bush's nominee to be ambassador to Spain. Zappala and Sembler helped found Straight.

Committee Chairman Claiborne Pell, a Democrat from Rhode Island, had asked Zappala about a \$220,000 jury award given to a former Straight client who claimed he was falsely imprisoned by the organization. Zappala is expected to answer the questions in writing.

The Straight controversy is not expected to derail the nomination of either of the nominees from St. Petersburg. No date has been set for a committee vote on their nominations.

The probing questions about Straight weren't asked Monday, possibly because Pell didn't attend the hearing. Instead, Sembler faced a friendly committee of one Democratic and three Republican senators.

The GOP senators all said they were impressed with Straight Inc. and the nominee Bush had sent them.

Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., noted that he had seen a videotape of children in the program. "You'll get emotional as you watch it," Helms commented, adding that he "commends" Sembler's work with Straight.

"You are a credit to our state," said Sen. Connie Mack, R-Fla.

The nominee answered questions about his job as ambassador to Australia, a post that also includes representing the United States in the small nation of Nauru.

He said he would continue work to open trade routes with Australia and also indicated his general support for a plan by Sen. Alan Cranston, D-Calif., to coordinate U.S. trade relations with nations in the Pacific Basin.

Bush nominated Sembler and Zappala earlier this year in a move widely regarded as a reward for their fund-raising abilities.

Sembler, 59, has contributed \$142,000 to Republican candidates since 1985, according to a disclosure form he sent to the Senate committee.

Zappala has contributed \$130,000 to GOP candidates over the last two years, according to his disclosure form.

[Illustration]

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Caption: Mel Sembler

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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