Drug treatment program isn't answer for every child Series: Going Straight

[CITY Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author:

DAVID FINKEL

Date:

May 10, 1987

Start Page:

1.D

Section:

PERSPECTIVE

Text Word Count: 1477

Document Text

"Drug treatment is different. This is not a normal world." - Bill Oliver, executive director of the Straight Foundation

It was 16 months ago when Bill Oliver said that to me, and in the time since I have come to realize he is right.

At Straight, drug treatment is different.

At Straight, the world is not a normal place at all.

For a series of stories that were published last week in the St. Petersburg Times, I followed the progress of a drug-dependent teen-ager from the time he first entered Straight on March 31, 1986 to the time he left a year later. He left a success. The program worked wonders for him. Yet even on his last day, his time of personal triumph, a question kept nagging at me.

The guestion: If the time came, would I ever put my child in Straight?

The answer: I don't know.

It's an answer that amazes me because when I began researching the stories, my answer at that point would have been a flat out no. Then I began observing the methods of Straight as closely as any outsider has ever seen them. In the young man I followed, whose name is Paul I saw phenomenal changes.

When he entered the program, he was two days shy of his 16th birthday. He was a small, skinny boy lacking in self-confidence, and his troubles with drugs ran deep. A year later when he left the program, he had stopped using drugs, he was getting along with his parents, he had goals and high hopes.

But one success doesn't mean an entire program is perfect, and some of the things I saw over the past year left me convinced that Straight is imperfect in many ways.

There is high turnover among the staff. In its defense, Straight says that in such an intensive program, turnover should be expected. But in the past year Straight has had three different directors. That seems like a lot in a program where a child's rehabilitation depends in large part on routine and continuity.

At lower staff levels, turnover was also high: At one point while I was following Paul, the program seemed bloated with staff members who knew the goals of the program and could recite the theories behind them, but didn't seem to understand what makes those theories work.

"Why do you sing that particular song?" I once asked a staff member after hearing a roomful of teen-agers sing "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" in a slow, awkward cadence.

"I don't know. We've always done it that way," was his reply.

If my child had been in the program, that answer wouldn't have been good enough for me.

There is an extraordinary emphasis on the role of parents.

One of the more commendable aspects of Straight is that it seeks to heal an entire family, not just the child with a drug dependency. The problem is that at some point in the program, most families become ''host homes,'' which means other young people in the program come to live with them, getting support and guidance in the process. For the being a host home was one of the more rewarding parts of the program, but the are exceptional: Their marriage is strong, and they give off the sense that they're in control.

This isn't true of some of the other parents whose children are in the program. In many cases, it is their behavior that has alienated a child into drug use, and it would bother me greatly if my child spent time in such a home. To have my child turn to such a troubled parent for help - a parent with no professional counseling skills and distorted emotions - could be ruirious.

There are problems with communication. At one point, Paul came within a heartbeat of being expelled from Straight.

Written off as unsalvageable by Straight's then-associate director, Paul was sent away from the program, and only the last-minute intervention of the director, who had taken a special interest in Paul, allowed him to return. Paul got another chance and proved so successful he is now in training to join the staff; how many other kids were sent home and not given a second chance to come back?

Another time, just after Paul entered the program, the group sang an old spiritual song in which the lyrics could be construed as racist. Asked about it, a senior staff member conceded the song could be considered offensive and said it would be sung no more. Yet toward the end of Paul's program, the song was still being sung often enough that all the people in the program had memorized the words; when asked why, the staff member said he didn't know.

There are other peculiarities of the program: There is the inanity of the entire group saying ``Love you`` to whoever has just finished speaking, as if saying such a thing by routine could make a person feel warm and wanted.

There is the oddity of ``motivating,`` the process of stabbing a hand in the air to be called on to speak. More than once, I saw kids motivate to a point that seemed painful, only to have a discussion leader egg them on to try even harder by saying, ``Motivating is what separates winners from losers.``

There is the "whiteness" of the program. Of the 233 people who were admitted to Straight from the time Paul began the program to the time he finished, only a handful were black. Almost all were white and from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds. If Straight is, as it contends, one of the country's most successful drug-treatment programs, it should figure out ways to make its methods available to a wider segment of the population.

Perhaps surprisingly, my biggest complaint isn't concerned with the allegations of brainwashing and cultism that have surrounded Straight since its inception. Straight, I've decided, may be peculiar, but a cult it isn't; while a cult seeks to isolate its members, Straight's ultimate goal is to return them to society.

Instead, my complaint is with Straight's insistence that it be allowed to hold people under 18 against their will, as long as their parent or guardian gives approval. To me, this isn't only unnecessary, it's also potentially abusive.

Straight, after all, is a business. It may have nonprofit status, but it also has visions of expanding. In 11 years, it has grown from one treatment center in Pinellas County to eight in seven states, and by the end of 1988, officials hope to have the number up to 13.

All of this takes money. All of this takes a bank account that is growing rather than shrinking. Straight may insist its motives are pure and its screening process for potential clients the best, but these are fat times in drug rehabilitation. What about the slow times? What might happen when the blue chairs of Straight are empty and the bills need to be paid? Would Straight relax its admission standards to increase business?

All of this then, is why I don't know if I would put my child in Straight. When I try to figure out the answer, I find myself thinking about three things:

First - the ______. They are a healed family. Straight, they say, is the best thing that ever happened to them.

Second - a phone call I received recently from a woman in tears. Six years ago, she said, she tried to get her son in Straight - or any other drug-treatment program - but was turned down because she had no money or insurance. "I was on the phone for almost a week," she said. "I went to church groups. I swore I would pay back the money. I begged." She got no help, though, and six years later her son is still out on the streets, high as can be, out of control. There is a horror to drug abuse, she said weeping, that can't even be imagined.

Third - what I've seen.

What, then, would I do with my child?

I know I never want to become the woman on the phone. I also know chances are good my child would emerge from Straight as healthy as Paul did.

But from what I have seen in the past year, I know too that putting her in would be the last step I would take.

I wouldn't put her in if her drug use were experimental. I wouldn't put her in if she were doing nothing more than smoking pot or drinking. The program is severe. It changes lives. If I were certain she did need help, I would try counselors, I would try less demanding programs, I would try anything. Only then, if all of those things failed, might I try Straight as a final attempt.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

For a series of stories that were published last week in the St. Petersburg Times, I followed the progress of a drug-dependent teen-ager from the time he first entered Straight on March 31, 1986 to the time he left a year later. He left a success. The program worked wonders for him. Yet even on his last day, his time of personal triumph, a question kept nagging at me.

It's an answer that amazes me because when I began researching the stories, my answer at that point would have been a flat out no. Then I began observing the methods of Straight as closely as any outsider has ever seen them. In the young man I followed, whose name is Paul I saw phenomenal changes.

There is high turnover among the staff. In its defense, Straight says that in such an intensive program, turnover should be expected. But in the past year Straight has had three different directors. That seems like a lot in a program where a child's rehabilitation depends in large part on routine and continuity.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.