

Going Straight // Part 2: The first 50 days in the program Series: Going Straight

[CITY Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

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Date: May 4, 1987

Start Page: 1.A

Section: NATIONAL

Text Word Count: 3534

Document Text

They found the bag of pot, even though he had hidden it in his underwear. He thought it was safe there. But then they told him to undress for a strip search, and the bag fell out to the floor. "Pot?" they said, not surprised.

They found the rolling papers, too, even though he had hidden them in the lining of his shoe.

His name is Paul [REDACTED]. He was two days shy of his 16th birthday. A few hours before, he had awakened in his home in Tampa. He had thrown on some clothes, ducked outside and smoked some pot. Then he got in the car with his parents, Bill and Julie [REDACTED], who drove him to a plain-looking building just north of St. Petersburg.

Paul didn't know where he was. He thought he was at a family counselor. Only when he was inside did he learn that his parents had brought him to a drug rehabilitation program called Straight.

For two hours, he resisted admitting himself to the program. His mother begged. His father cried. He listened to them, stoned as could be. He cried, too, and then began throwing things.

Now, here he was, signed in, still a bit high, in a room with two other young men enrolled in the program. Their hair was short. They kept saying the word "druggie." Every time he stood up, they grabbed him by his belt loops.

"How do you get high in this place?" he asked them.

"You don't," they said.

They asked him to strip. They checked his shoes. They ran their fingers along his shirt collar, feeling for bulges.

His urine was tested. His blood was taken. He was asked to list what drugs he had taken.

He was led by his belt loops down a hallway, through a guarded door and into a huge room with a concrete floor. Fifty young people were crowded together in there, seated in close rows of blue plastic chairs. They were jerking their hands in the air so frantically that the room was filled with snapping sounds.

"Okay, listen up!" someone yelled. "This is Paul. He's done pot, alcohol, cocaine, mushrooms, LSD and speed. He's from Tampa. Does anyone know him?"

Fifty heads turned. Paul stood there, feeling them look him over. He knew no one. He had nothing to say.

But they had something to say to him.

"Love you, Paul!" they shouted in unison. Then their hands shot back into the air, and the room was filled again with snapping sounds. "The humbling phase"

In Straight, there is a name for everything.

"Making amends," for instance, is apologizing, usually tearfully, for bad behavior.

"Motivating" is waving your hand in the air to be called on to speak, waving it so hard that your arm aches and you begin to perspire.

“Commencing” is graduating from the program.

And “First Phase” is what Paul entered into on March 31, 1986, the initial stage of a five-phase program that takes an average of 12 months to complete.

Straight, based in mid-Pinellas County, is one of the nation's largest, and perhaps most controversial, drug rehabilitation programs. Over the past 11 years it has treated more than 6,000 young drug abusers under an elaborate theory of rehabilitation that - at its simplest - uses peer pressure, guilt, despair and finally joy, to help a person realize how damaging drug use can be.

The five phases are the skeleton of the program. Each is designed to replace a person's dependence on drugs with more intrinsic pleasures, such as a strengthened family. All of the phases are designed to be intensive and difficult. But First Phase is usually the most difficult of all because of the abrupt changes it brings to a drug user's life.

One day he is hanging out, getting high.

And the next, he is sealed in a room with dozens of other drug abusers, not allowed to speak unless spoken to, led everywhere by his belt loops to show he has lost control of his life.

He is in the room at least 10 hours a day, six days a week. He spends nights in the unfamiliar homes of others in the program. He is cut off from his home, parents, school, friends, music, TV and books. The only things he can do are talk about his feelings and listen as others in the program tear his life apart.

“First Phase,” says staff member Mike ██████ “is the humbling phase.”

It is the phase to break down resistance. It goes on for at least 14 days and often for months. It lasts until the person learns to dig out his secrets, to motivate until he aches, to make amends until he cries. Only when he is feeling worthless and miserable is he considered to be making progress.

Then, slowly, come the rewards.

The first is something called “talk,” which means that he can speak face-to-face with his parents at Straight for 20 minutes a week.

The second is “talk and responsibility,” which means that in addition to speaking with his parents, he can also stand guard at doors to make sure that no one runs away from the program.

Finally, when he admits his dependence on drugs and convinces the staff he wants to change, he earns Second Phase, which means that he can return to his home to sleep for the first time since entering the program. Then come phases three, four and five.

Each phase comes with its own set of hurdles, but it is the methods of First Phase that have caused the bulk of complaints about Straight, including allegations of physical and mental abuse. Other than some fine-tuning, though, Straight officials have stuck to their methods, insisting they are the best in the country.

“We know how to do it,” says Bill Oliver, executive director of the Straight Foundation. “You've got to play it our way.”

Still, to someone entering the program, the methods can seem disconcerting. All doors are guarded. Kids stand up, start talking and end up crying. Everyone yells “Love you!” whenever someone finishes speaking. And every hour or so, there is a group sing-along to tunes such as a Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah, which for some reason is sung in an odd, almost-brooding cadence.

Paul's reaction that first day was to take all this in and scowl. Like just about everyone entering the program, he thought he could beat it by playing along. He'd be home in no time.

He was led by a belt loop to the front row and given a chair. He slumped and looked at his shoes.

“What's your name?” someone asked.

“Paul,” he said.

“Sit up, Paul.”

‘Acting like a jerk’

He didn't.

He didn't sit up, he didn't talk, he didn't stop scowling. For two days, he didn't do anything except slouch and watch.

He saw a boy stand up and begin throwing wild punches. Chairs scattered, and five other young men tackled him to the

floor, pinning his arms and legs until he calmed down.

He listened to a graduate who had checked himself back into the program explain how he felt about falling back into drug use: "I feel embarrassed. I feel ashamed. I feel guilty."

He watched 50 young people spastically wave their arms just so they could be called on to share the most trivial of memories:

"I remember when we used to go to the drive-in movies, and we'd take those Charlie Chip potato chip cans and sit on 'em ..."

"Love you!"

"I remember going over to a friend's house and watching wrestling on TV ..."

"Love you!"

"I remember when I'd catch tadpoles ..."

"Love you!"

But mixed in with this were also moments that Paul couldn't help but absorb. There was talk of parents who slap, of brothers who taunt, of friends who betray, of first love, of sex, of guilt, of misery, of breakdowns.

"I guess what he wanted out of me was drugs and sex," a girl wept one day, explaining how her boyfriend had taken advantage of her. "But I didn't care, I guess, because I was lonely."

"I've never done anything right in my life. I never have, and I never will," a young man named John said later, sobbing. "I've disappointed my parents so much." He cried harder and harder until he grew wobbly. He began gasping for breath as if he had been punched in the stomach. "I feel like I'm going to pass out. I feel like I'm high. I feel jittery. I'm so scared ..."

If any of this made Paul want to change his ways, though, he didn't show it. He turned out to be a fighter.

He slouched. He threw punches. He threw chairs. He kept trying to withdraw from the program until his mother threatened to have him put in there by court order.

"He is acting like a little jerk," one staff member wrote in an evaluation on Day 15, about the time he could have been moving onto Second Phase.

"Still being a jerk," was the comment a week later.

On his 11th day in the program, he had to be tackled to the floor and restrained. On his 16th day, according to a staff report: "Paul got angry and started to hit the guys next to him. He was restrained on the floor ... Craig (another young man in Straight) was bitten on his left arm, but no medical attention was necessary."

On Day 26, he threw water on people. On Day 30: another fight, another bite.

While others talked tearfully about their drug use, he sat morosely in his chair. He found a staple and began carving on his arm until it was covered with long, red scratches. He tried to hit his head on the concrete floor when he was being restrained.

One day, he broke a light fixture and was sent to something called the "Time-Out Room." He was kept in there a long time. After a while, he lay flat on the floor, peered out the crack under the door and watched the group. From that distance, the motivating and the "Love You's" didn't seem so bad to him. But when he returned to the group, he wouldn't say a thing.

Critics of Straight say this is one of the most dangerous times in the program, the time when a young person, cut off so long from everything he knows, finally buckles under emotional starvation. He has been in the program for weeks, day and night. He changes, but only because his resistance has been beaten down. He succumbs rather than progresses.

Straight officials say this isn't simply so, that there comes a time when a person finally sees there is a better way to live a life. That, they say, is the strength of what is called peer counseling: If a person sees others like himself making changes, he'll want to make changes, too.

First trip home

Whatever the reasons in Paul's case, he did, in fact, finally begin to change. It happened a few days after the worst incident of all, the day he tried to punch someone hard enough to injure him.

He had been in Straight more than a month. He was sick of the whole thing. Someone told him to sit up, and he swung hard, hitting the young man square in the face. He was tackled and restrained. The police were called. Charges were threatened. And a few days later, he began to turn himself around.

He stood in front of the group and apologized for the way he had behaved. He began motivating so fiercely that he woke up the next day with a sore neck.

“He would cry,” staff member Mike ██████ said, recalling Paul’s changes. “He would say, ‘I don’t want to go back to my past.’ He would say, ‘I don’t want to go back to my friends who teased me. I’m scared.’ He was scared to be straight because the only way he could have friends was through acceptance, and he felt if he gave up drugs, he wouldn’t have any friends.”

Just as the young man named John had said he felt a few weeks before, Paul felt high, jittery. Perhaps it was the relief of unburdening, the rush that comes with confession, but he was exhilarated. He poured his heart out every chance he got. He motivated so hard, he made snapping sounds as his fingers flew against each other. He cried huge tears.

On Day 36, he earned the privilege of talking to his parents for the first time since entering the program. He hugged them, apologized for what he had put them through and hugged them again.

On Day 43, he earned “talk and responsibility,” and he began guarding doors.

Finally, on Day 50, he asked for permission to enter Second Phase and go home.

“A screaming eagle,” Straight’s then-associate director, Charles Larsen, said at a staff meeting to decide what to do about Paul’s request. “He’s a little kid, but he was going berserk for a while.”

“Paul’s come a long way,” said another staff member, Scott ██████ “I think that guy needs support at home.”

“How’s his family feel about it?” Larsen said.

“They’ll probably be real excited after 50 days of hell,” staff member John Johnson said. “Paul’s going to wet his pants.”

“Fifty days and 50 nights? It’s time for him to go home,” Larsen said.

Paul found out that evening.

When he heard staff members call out his name, he stood apprehensively. When he heard, “You’re going home,” he broke into a huge grin and began to cry as friends came over to embrace him.

It was a Monday evening. Bill and Julie, Paul’s parents, were in an adjoining room, gathered with other parents for their weekly Monday night meeting. He pushed open the door to their room and burst in.

“Coming home!” he yelled.

He ran across the room. His parents stood. He tumbled into the arms of his mother, who burst into tears. His father put his arms around his wife and son and closed his eyes.

In Straight, the announcement of making Second Phase is purposely designed to be a deeply emotional, uplifting scene, and in Paul’s case that certainly happened.

While everyone else in the room applauded this latest example of how Straight can work wonders, the three of them stood holding tightly onto each other, a weeping mountain of a family.

A sense of accomplishment

An hour later, off they went, home.

“This is the phase where you’re going to learn what Straight is all about,” one of the parents had said to them as they prepared to leave.

“I just hope his dog doesn’t bite him,” Bill answered, laughing.

It had been a long haul. Fifty days had passed, and Paul was an inch taller and 12 pounds heavier. He sat between his parents as they drove north on I-275, across the Howard Frankland Bridge, into north Tampa, into their neighborhood.

They would be back at Straight the next day, and the day after. They would be back for at least the next 5 1/2 months, the minimum amount of time it would take for Paul to complete the program. Anything could happen. Some people take two years to finish the program, only to sink back into drug use. Some never finish.

But for the moment, in this family, there was a deep sense of accomplishment. Paul, especially, glowed.

Thinking back to the day he was first taken to Straight, he said, "It was real scary. They all talked funny. They all looked funny. And then, when they said, 'Love You,' I thought it was a gay-love place."

About his first afternoon there, he said, "I sat there thinking of ways I could do drugs. I went to the bathroom and saw a plunger and thought of hitting the guy in the face and running out of there."

About scratching up his arm: "The feelings, they build up. It gets out the frustrations, the anger. And each time you dig deeper it's like the anger comes out. You don't feel the pain until later."

About trying to hit his head against the floor: "I really thought I was crazy."

About a family he had stayed with for several nights: "It was like how I wanted my family. There was a sister and mother and father, just like mine. I kept imagining they were my family, and I didn't want to let them down."

About earning Second Phase: "When I ran across the floor, it's like I saw the whole 50 days in front of me, all the bad and good things, all the way from the beginning. They say it's like running through Jell-O, like it takes a million years to get there. But when I got there to my Mom, it was worth it."

About seeing his house again after so long: "Home's great."

He walked in the front door.

The dog remembered him.

Everything looked familiar.

But back in his bedroom, upon directions from Straight, he discovered there had been changes.

His walls had been stripped of every poster he had carefully put up - posters of rock groups such as Motley Crue and AC-DC. The entire room, blue when he left, had been painted beige. The dresser had been moved into another room so he wouldn't have a place to hide things. His desk had been emptied, moved into his closet, and the closet locked. The headboard of his bed had been sanded down where he had carved the words "Motley Crue."

An alarm had been installed on the window in case he tried to sneak out.

The door had an alarm, too.

Nonetheless, as Paul walked through the home he hadn't seen in so long, his smile was wide as could be.

He ate some food. He petted his dog. He played with his hamster. He was not yet allowed to watch TV or listen to music so he talked with his parents. Midnight came and went.

Finally, his mother walked him down the hallway and hugged him. He went into his room of bare walls and a bed. She closed the door behind him and activated the alarm.

"Goodnight," she said. Next: What a parent goes through

A day at Straight

A day at Straight begins early and lasts long. From the time they arrive until they leave, those enrolled in the program take part in continuous "rap sessions," discussions that range from reciting the rules of Straight to talking about intimate and troubling problems. Most of the sessions are led by graduates of the program who have joined the staff. Each day's schedule is different - Friday sessions, for instance, can last until midnight - but the schedule of a typical day is as follows: 6:30 a.m. The building opens. Clients begin arriving. 9 a.m. All clients should be present. Attendance is taken. Medication for those with illnesses such as headaches and asthma is dispensed (sick call). The clients take their seats and begin singing songs in unison such as Straight Is It (sung to Coke Is It). 9:15 a.m. "Basics Rap." In this, clients are called on to recite the 12 steps of the program (modeled after the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous), such as admitting a dependency on drugs and a need for spiritual help. 10 a.m. "Morning Rap." This discussion is meant to get clients talking about such aspects of their lives as how they used to get high and how they feel about it now. Noon lunch and open discussion. 1 p.m. "Guys' Rap and Girls' Rap." The group is separated; the males go to one room, the females to another. Discussions deal with self-image, personal problems and sexuality. Often the most intense discussion of the day. 3 p.m. Exercise. 3:30 p.m. "Afternoon Rap." This session deals with problems clients are having such as family crises or coping with the demands of the program. Though short, it also can be intense and heavily confrontive. 4:15 p.m. Dinner, sick call, open discussion. 4:45 p.m. "Rules Rap." Clients recite the rules of the program, such as the importance of honesty, the prohibition against newcomers talking to other newcomers and the procedure for withdrawing from the program. 5:15 p.m. "Night Rap." This is intended to be an emotional, uplifting discussion that will leave the clients in a somewhat positive mood. Topics might include friendship and learning to accept others. 6:45 p.m.

Sick call, reciting the Lord's prayer, arranging the evening's sleeping accommodations, lining up heel-to-toe at the door for dismissal. 7 p.m. Dismissal.

[Illustration]

COLOR PHOTO, Cherie Diez, (2); BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, Cherie [REDACTED] Caption: ``Motivating`` is waving your hand in the air to be called on to speak, waving it so hard that your arm aches and you begin to perspire; Newcomers to Straight are led around by their belt loops to symbolize how they have lost control of their; Caption: lives; At Straight, Paul [REDACTED] sits in front of signs listing the 12 steps of the program, modeled after those used by Alcoholics Anonymous.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

His name is Paul [REDACTED]. He was two days shy of his 16th birthday. A few hours before, he had awakened in his home in Tampa. He had thrown on some clothes, ducked outside and smoked some pot. Then he got in the car with his parents, Bill [Oliver] and Julie [REDACTED], who drove him to a plain-looking building just north of St. Petersburg.

Paul didn't know where he was. He thought he was at a family counselor. Only when he was inside did he learn that his parents had brought him to a drug rehabilitation program called Straight.

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