

Going Straight // Part 3: The parents' story Series: Going Straight

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In the day-to-day existence of Julie [REDACTED], it was the normal occurrence that showed her how abnormal her life had become.

It was the delivery man from Little Caesar's Pizza, for instance, bringing the pepperoni pies. It was the neighbor who would drop by unexpectedly, wanting nothing more than a cup of sugar. It was merely opening the front door.

"You hear the doorbell ring," Julie said, describing the hardship a visit would cause. "You go to the door. You say, 'Door,' loud enough to be heard in other rooms. You unlock the door, open it, find out the neighbor wants a cup of sugar. You tell her, 'Just a minute.' You shut the door, lock it, go to the kitchen, get the sugar, come back to the door, say 'Door,' unlock it, open it, give her the cup of sugar and say, 'I'm sorry, you can't come in.'

"If you go outside to talk, you have to lock the door on your way out. Then, when you want to get back in, you have to ring the doorbell, and then somebody else has to come to the door and say 'Door' to let you in."

On March 30, 1986, Julie [REDACTED] didn't say "door" whenever she was about to open her door. On March 30, there was no need to shout any kind of warning because her house wasn't yet filled with young men who might run away the first chance they got.

Then, on March 31, the [REDACTED] youngest child, Paul, entered a drug rehabilitation program called Straight, and overnight everything changed.

Several months later, as Julie found herself living in a home filled each evening with youngsters who spent their days at Straight and then came to the [REDACTED] to sleep, these were among her memories of how her life used to be:

Going out.

Having friends over.

Spending time alone with her husband Bill.

Having more than a few moments a day to herself before she dropped off to sleep, exhausted.

"People don't believe this," she said of what her life had become. "Nobody has any concept of what really goes on in our house.

"I had one boy in my house they wanted to test for AIDS because they thought he had a mixed sexual background. I've had kids who had shot up every day, kids who have gotten drugs in exchange for sex, kids who have been in jail - not jail for kids but adult prisons."

All of them slept under her roof. At night, she would lock them and her son into his bedroom. In the morning, she would let them out and hug them as if she were their mother.

"Car thefts," she said, listing some of the crimes they had committed. "Armed robbery. Burglary. Arson." Generations apart

Thirty years ago, in what now seems like a different time entirely, Julie [REDACTED] was a teen-ager. She attended a Catholic

high school in Detroit. She wore her hair long. She had a poodle skirt in her closet. She never, never drank.

Forty years ago, Bill [REDACTED] was a teen-ager, also in Detroit. He did drink. Every few weeks, he and a dozen of his friends would get a couple of cases of beer, head for the woods of Michigan and drink until every beer was gone. One time, when he was 16, he came home so drunk he threw up right in front of his father, who promptly made him gulp down a shot of whiskey that only made him sicker.

His father, an immigrant who worked for Chrysler, was a drinker, too. Every night before dinner, he'd have a shot or two to pave the way for the coming meal. He could control his drinking, though. Bill couldn't.

In his 20s, he began putting away six-packs of beer as if they were so much water. In his 30s, he was drinking a fifth of whiskey a day. In his 40s, he was still drinking that much when he met Julie.

They met in 1973. Both had been married. Both had had children. They dated for a year-and-a-half, got married and adopted each other's children, and in 1977 they moved to Tampa, settling into a house near the Hillsborough River.

Ten years later, the house has become a cozy, cluttered place that smells pleasantly of coffee and bacon, a middle-class home all the way. There is wood paneling in the den. There are bowling balls in the front closet. There is a dog.

Nowhere, though, is there any liquor. On his own, Bill admitted to himself he was an alcoholic and brought his addiction under control soon after he and Julie were married. No longer does he drink, except for an occasional beer after bowling. Julie, never more than a social drinker, might order a sloe-gin-and-7-Up on the rare night she and Bill get to go out, but that's it.

Neither drinks at home. Neither gets drunk under any circumstance. Because of Bill's history, both are aware of how troubling an addiction can be and how early it can take root.

Yet when it comes to Paul, the dependency he developed on marijuana and pills and cocaine seems unfathomable to them. They weren't teen-agers so long ago that they've forgotten the peer pressure that comes with the age; still, they say, the pressure on a teen-ager today must be a thousand times worse than it was in their time.

"Nobody pressured me to drink, and nobody rejected me because I didn't," Julie says.

"Let's face it," says Bill. "When I was growing up, everybody was poor, so you didn't know you were poor. You had to use your imagination. Now it's all material. I can buy blue jeans for 10 or 15 bucks, Paul wants ones that cost 27. I buy sneakers for \$12, he wants Nikes."

Paul wanted them - and Paul got them. He got the Nikes and the \$27 jeans, and when those wore out, he got fresh ones. And a skateboard. And a \$250 bike. And a computer. And tickets to the tractor pull ("Paul wanted to go," says Julie. "We were the first ones in line for tickets.").

Bill and Julie wanted to be good parents to Paul, and they thought they were.

Only later, after he was enrolled in Straight, were they told that their behavior had probably contributed to Paul's problems. They were told that instead of being encouraging, they were being manipulated; that instead of being understanding, they were being pushovers.

"Giving in," Julie said, explaining the lesson. "Doing for."

"Not following through," said Bill.

"Enabling," Straight called it. They were enabling Paul to destroy himself. Demands of the program

That lesson came later. Their first lesson, as painful in its own way, was that Straight doesn't come cheap, and in many cases - including theirs - insurance covers none of the expenses.

Just walking in the door to have Paul admitted cost the [REDACTED] \$1,089; two weeks later came a \$1,600 evaluation fee; then came a monthly charge of \$350 (raised to \$385 this year) that would continue until Paul left the program.

On top of that there were other expenses. Gas money for driving 80 miles to and from Straight each day. A \$2 donation the [REDACTED] would give weekly during parents' meetings when a contribution basket was passed around. A \$25 donation for a commercial about Straight to be aired during a TV program on drug abuse. And more.

To a middle-class family just making ends meet anyway, the financial demands of Straight were hard enough; the [REDACTED] had to dip deep into their savings. To Bill [REDACTED], though, far harder were the other demands the program makes on parents of its clients, demands that would soon turn the [REDACTED]'s life completely around.

"I think the hardest part has got to be the time involved," Bill said. "It seems you're just going from one thing to the next. You're never relaxed."

All of this began the day he and Julie dropped Paul off at the program. Paul went in, and they went home - and that evening they were back again for a parents' meeting. "This program is not only for them, it's for you, too," the discussion leader told the [REDACTED] as he handed them a list of rules.

Bill flipped through them. They totaled nine pages. Among them:

"Attendance at Open meetings (every Monday and Friday night) is mandatory for all parents."

"Siblings (8 and up) are to attend Saturday Sibling Rap 10-12 noon and Friday night raps, except when excused."

"Both parents must be in the home each night that the child is on First and Second Phase. In cases of emergency, these parents may submit travel plans and Staff may approve or deny this travel."

"Overnight business travel will be considered for parents with a child on Third, Fourth (or) Fifth Phase. Plans for such travel must be submitted to Staff for approval."

"Vacation is permitted for families on Fifth Phase only. Staff approval of vacation plans is required."

Silently, the [REDACTED] listened as they were told it wasn't just Paul who was in need of help, but their entire family. By the time they headed out to the parking lot and their car, it was after dark. Bill, exhausted, lit a cigarette. So did Julie.

"Mom!" they heard someone call.

It was Paul. He was on the other side of the parking lot, waiting for a ride to the home of another young man in the program. He was being held by one of his belt loops.

"Dad!"

Bill and Julie knew they weren't supposed to have any contact with their son for several weeks. They weren't supposed to talk with him. They weren't even supposed to see him.

"Mom!"

But instincts took over. Julie, recognizing the voice, turned to look at her son. For a moment, Bill did, too, but then he reached for Julie, gently turned her away and steered her toward their car.

"Mom!"

They got in. They shut the doors and drove off.

By the time they got home, it was after 10 p.m. That was on a Monday. The following Friday, they were back again for a second parents' meeting, this time not getting home until almost midnight. The following Monday they were back again, and then Friday, and then Monday, and so it went, week after week.

They gave up their bowling league.

They sold their camper.

"I figured it was going to be two months and that's it," Bill said at one point. "Now I know that's impossible."

They began volunteering to work at the bingo game that Straight runs weekly to raise money.

Julie began going directly from her part-time bookkeeping job to Straight to be a "Runner Mom," which meant doing anything from addressing envelopes to going on errands.

They went to open meetings and learned to say "Love you" while hugging other parents.

And after the father of one young man in Straight sidled up to them one evening and said, "I didn't see you at the parents' weekend," they went to the next one on the schedule.

It was held in a church in downtown St. Petersburg. For two days, most of the parents of children in Straight had to act as if they, themselves, were enrolled in the program. They were led around by their belt loops. Julie couldn't wear makeup or jewelry. No one could smoke. They took part in "rap sessions," emotional discussions during which couples broke down as they talked about how miserable their lives had become and ended up in clinging embraces. "You'd be surprised what it did for some couples," Julie said, after it was over.

For her, one of the tougher parts was eating lunch. She made a peanut butter and raspberry jelly sandwich. She spent all morning looking forward to it. Then, Straight officials exchanged the lunches everyone had brought, and while she watched someone else enjoying the sandwich she had so carefully made, she ended up with another parent's concoction - plain old peanut butter on plain old bread, no jelly, dry and thin. Opening their home

Then things really got difficult.

Fifty days after Paul entered the program, he was promoted to Second Phase, which meant he could begin sleeping at home instead of spending his evenings in the homes of other young men in Straight.

That's when the [REDACTED] became what Straight calls a "host home." That's when other young men in the program began spending their nights with the [REDACTED].

At first, Julie resisted. "When I was first told I was going to be a host home, I said, 'No way I'm going to have a house full of druggies.'"

"But they said, 'What'd you have before?'"

So each evening, the [REDACTED] house became home to three or four troubled young strangers. The robbers. The burglars. The arsonist.

Often, they came to the house right after being checked into the program, which meant they were usually high and often drunk. Some nights, Julie would be up past midnight listening to them pour their hearts out. One night, she had to help break up a fistfight. Yet eventually, she said, she realized all of the young men had their good sides: "These kids, no matter how rebellious they are, they're grateful that you would even take them in."

That realization, though, came later. First came profound changes in the way the [REDACTED] household operated, changes based on the burden of having as many as five extra people under one roof and the concern that one of them might try to run away or hurt himself.

Doors were closed and bolted.

All sharp knives and scissors were locked in a toolbox and kept in a back room. "I go out back and get the knife, use it, wash it and put it back," Julie said, describing the process of slicing up tomatoes for a salad. "We don't even put it in the dishwasher."

Breakable drinking glasses were replaced by plastic cups; breakable plates were replaced by paper ones.

Shampoo use had to be monitored because at another host home, a young woman had tried to make herself sick by drinking a bottle of it.

Visitors - including the fiance of Paul's older sister Jodie - weren't allowed in the house at night.

Loads of dirty clothes began piling up so quickly, Julie found herself doing a load a day. Electric bills went up. So did water bills. And grocery bills. And other bills. "We've worn out I don't know how many towels," Julie said.

And, of course, everyone began saying "door" when opening the door. "I have gone to the door when nobody's at home and yelled, 'Door,'" Julie said. "I'm sure the pizza man must think we're crazy."

"Sleep, work and Straight," Bill said, describing what life had become. "I didn't think it would be as tough as it's been."

"There's times when I'm tired, I don't want to be bothered, I just want to do my own thing," Julie said. "But when you see all the changes in the kids ..."

Always, that's what Bill and Julie would find themselves thinking about. The changes. Every time they would begin thinking how disrupted their lives had become, they would remind themselves of how bad it had been when Paul was taking drugs. The fights. The screaming. The slammed doors. The tension.

"I've had people say, 'How can you do this?' and I say, 'It may take a year of my life, but it's giving my kid his life back,'" Julie said.

"You change if it's going to help your kid out," Bill said. "It's to help all of us, really." A "better" family

Out of this chaos, then, a troubled family began healing. Paul got better, and so did Bill and Julie. Paul got nicer, and they did, too.

They became a better family. Not perfect: Jodie, Paul's older sister, often felt slighted by the amount of attention Paul was getting from her parents. "If Paul has a problem, they hurry up and sit down and talk about it. If I have a problem, they don't," she said at one point. "One night we got into a big argument, and I said, 'Just because I'm not in Straight doesn't mean I can't express myself,' and my father said, 'Why don't you be quiet - you'll upset everybody,' and I said, 'My God, I might upset someone from Straight ...'"

Not perfect - but better.

"I've learned to listen," said Bill.

"I think we all had a lack of communication," said Julie. "We yelled at Paul, or he yelled at us. Bill and I yelled at each other, we'd have fights. Now, we talk a lot more. We've all learned to communicate better."

"The best thing," said Jodie, who is a year older than Paul, "is I have my brother back."

So it was that on a night when Bill could have been bowling or watching TV or - in the old days - down drinking shots at the bar, he went with his son to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, one of two such meetings Paul was required to attend each week.

Paul was the youngest person there, but he wasn't at all inhibited: When called on to speak, he talked at length about how both drinking and drug use had affected him. "I'm Paul," he began, "and I'm an alcoholic and an addict."

Then Bill was called on to speak. It was his first time ever at a meeting like this. Even when he was quitting drinking, he had never gone to one. He looked around the room at the lined faces and the tired eyes. He looked at the man who had said drinking had ruined his marriage and at the woman who had said her drinking caused her to abandon her child. He looked at his son, so young looking, in the midst of all of them.

He cleared his throat and said, "I'm Bill, and I'm . . . the father of an alcoholic and an addict."

Paul said nothing.

Later, though, back at home, when Julie asked how the meeting had gone, he said, "Mom, don't you think Dad should have said he was an alcoholic?"

They were all in the kitchen. Bill sat at the table. Paul came up behind him.

"What'd he say?" Julie asked.

"He said he was the father of an alcoholic," Paul said.

Julie glanced toward her husband. He had come a long way since the day they had met. He had brought his drinking under control. He had learned to say, "I love you," to his son. His hair was beginning to recede and the wrinkles were growing deeper around his eyes, but he had been there for her and Paul all along. He had been thrilled when, a few weeks earlier, Paul had begun kissing him goodnight.

"Maybe you can get him to say it next time," Julie said to her son.

Paul shrugged and said nothing more about it. He began cleaning some dirty dishes while Bill lit a cigarette and Julie poured herself a cup of coffee. For the moment, it was quiet in the house.

Another day was drawing to a close.

Paul went off to get ready for bed. This night there were three young men staying with the [REDACTED], and they followed him toward his room.

Of the three, one was from out of town and was staying with the [REDACTED] even though he was well into the program's upper phases. The other two were just beginning, which meant that if they had to go to the bathroom, Paul would have to go with them to make sure they didn't try to climb out a window. Then, in the morning, if Paul wanted to take a shower, they would have to stand outside the tub with arms draped over the curtain rod so Paul would know they weren't running off.

From down the hall, Julie could hear the sounds of Paul lifting mattresses, checking his room for any drugs the other young men might have tried to sneak in. She sipped her coffee. In a few minutes, she would have to go lock them in for the night.

A bit weary, she leaned against the refrigerator door where a list of house rules was posted:

Beds made in the morning.

Oldcomers get 7-minute showers, newcomers get 5 minutes.

Fifty pushups if 'F' word is used.

"It's going to be so weird to lead a normal life," she said, thinking about the day when all of this would end. Next: Relapse

The rules of Straight

After a child enters Straight, one of the first things his or her parents receive is a list of rules governing their behavior while their child is in the program. When the [REDACTED] had Paul admitted, they received a list of rules nine pages long. Since then, the rules have been rewritten and reduced to six pages. Among them:

Parent Group Sessions and Open Meetings for all parents are every Monday and Friday at 6:15 p.m. during phases one, two and three; every Monday and Friday as assigned during phases four and five.

During phases one, two, three and four, clients are not to leave the house or stop anywhere going to and from the program. First and Second Phasers may not receive telephone calls, letters, cards or gifts.

Parents should check before Open Meeting to see if their child has a "Want List," i.e., a list of items he/ she needs, such as toothpaste, deodorant, socks, etc. All clothing and personal articles must have the client's name on them.

Parents are not to call Staff in reference to their child's progress. Staff will provide (periodic) progress reports.

No guests or visitors of the client to Open Meeting until the client is on Third Phase without Professional Staff permission. Call 48 hours ahead for permission.

Parents and guests are asked not to enter the lobby dressed in shorts, bathing suits, midriff, tank tops or tennis dresses.

Both parents must be in the home each night that the child is on First and Second Phase. In cases of emergency, these parents may submit travel plans and Staff may approve or deny this travel.

One day business travel - leaving home in the a.m. and arriving back at home same day in p.m. - will be allowed. Staff must be notified of travel plans so that parents may be contacted in case of emergency.

Vacation is permitted for families on Fifth Phase only.

Bring: spiral notebook; four pairs of pants; shoes; socks; jacket or sweater; five shirts; underwear; pajamas; robe; toothbrush; toothpaste; shaving equipment (disposable razors only); shaving cream (no aerosol); deodorant (no aerosol, plastic containers); comb; brush; shampoo (plastic container); personal hygiene items (no plastic tampons).

Do not bring: food; candy; gum; razor blades; magazines; books; cameras; tape recorders; radios; letters; photos; stuffed animals; shirts with drug-culture emblems; knives; sporting goods. Also: Do not put any type of medications in suitcase, please give it to the receptionist at the front desk.

[Illustration]

COLOR PHOTO, Eric [REDACTED]; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, Eric [REDACTED], (2); BLACK AND WHITE CHART, (2); Caption: Julie and Bill [REDACTED] 'The hardest part has got to be the time involved;' The [REDACTED] in their den: Pleasant, cozy, a middle-class home all the way; Paul's sister Jodie, 18, says, 'I have my brother back;' The rules of Straight, in a; Caption: box, which is appended; A box explaining about the series, which appeared previously.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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Nowhere, though, is there any liquor. On his own, Bill [REDACTED] admitted to himself he was an alcoholic and brought his addiction under control soon after he and Julie were married. No longer does he drink, except for an occasional beer after bowling. Julie, never more than a social drinker, might order a sloe-gin-and-7-Up on the rare night she and Bill get to go out, but that's it.

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