

Prosecutors want ex-counselor jailed

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CLEARWATER - Richard Bradbury once led rap sessions for hundreds of teen-agers at Straight Inc., the controversial drug-treatment program in Pinellas Park. He joined them in singing, "I'm here at Straight feeling great."

But Bradbury also says he beat the teens, cursed at them and denied them food. At the time, he said, he thought he was helping them get over their drug and alcohol problems. Now, he calls it "brainwashing."

More than two years ago, Bradbury formed an organization called "Close Straight." He and his friends began picketing the treatment center. They sent out newsletters and began telling their stories to reporters.

But Bradbury and a friend went too far, prosecutors say. They say he and Perry Rietze broke into Straight at 3001 Gandy Blvd. late Jan. 26, or early the following day, to steal records they planned to turn over to state officials.

A circuit judge earlier this year placed Rietze on three years' probation. Now Pinellas prosecutors want Bradbury to receive a tougher sentence - a year in the Pinellas County Jail and five years of probation. Bradbury says he has become the victim of a politically powerful organization that has pressured the state attorney's office.

Prosecutors say Straight didn't pressure them more than other "victims." They say Bradbury deserves a harsh sentence because he "masterminded" the scheme and harassed the drug-treatment center and its chairman of the board of directors, Mel Sembler.

On Tuesday, the two sides will be in court in an attempt to determine Bradbury's sentence.

"This was basically a burglary for sabotage," assistant state attorney Richard Ripplinger said. "That's pretty severe. It's not some kid going in somebody's garage and taking a case of beer. . . . They had a very elaborate plan."

Prosecutors accuse Bradbury of outlining a nine-step plan called "Fair Play" to steal records. When Pinellas Park police arrived at the scene, they noticed a ladder overhanging the top of the building. Rietze was on top of the building hiding, with two ski masks, two pairs of gloves and a rope dangling into the building from an open skylight.

Inside Rietze's car, police say they found a detailed map of the Straight building and the area surrounding it. Then they found the plan, "Fair Play." Rietze was arrested at the scene. Bradbury surrendered to authorities seven months later after learning of a warrant for his arrest.

Investigators say Bradbury and Rietze wanted to get records for state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) officials so they would investigate Straight's method of treating teen-agers. Straight officials would not comment on the case.

Bradbury also refused to discuss Tuesday's hearing, but readily admits he despises the organization.

"I brainwashed a lot of kids," he said. "I thought I was helping those kids. After going to college and doing research on counseling, I realized I wasn't."

Bradbury said he first got involved with the organization at 17. At the time, his sister was a client. But Straight officials threatened to dismiss her unless he also enrolled, he said. Bradbury said he didn't have a drug problem and only smoked marijuana once or twice.

After being held against his will at Straight for eight hours, Bradbury said, he finally signed papers agreeing to enroll.

Bradbury said he became ``brainwashed`` and started leading therapy sessions within months. But he said he became disgruntled after learning the teen-agers and some of their counselors continued using drugs. Straight officials ignored the problem, he said.

Bradbury said he also disliked their method of treatment, which included strip searches.

``My complaints fell on deaf ears,`` he said.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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