

Interview with L
Date: November 24th, 2001
Time: 6:30 P. M

Interview with Original Board Member

MH- Initial greeting

H- Oh , hi boy that was a long time ago.

MH-Did you donate the original building?

H-No, I worked closely with X of X lumber who donated the building. He donated most of the material for the building too.

MH- I see, what was your position at Straight Inc.

H – Well, I was the first Vice President in charge of the building. That would be the physical building. I was in charge of getting it ready and all.

MH- I see,

MH- How long were you there?

H- Not long

MH- Were you one of the ones that left within a year or so?

H- Yes, myself and lets see , name too, he was a veterinarian

MH- I see, what was your opinion on Straight?

H- You see, what was beginning to happen in Straight was the same thing that happened in the seed that made it close down. They Were moving away from what we wanted. You see, the first building well, it was not in the upper middle class section of town and we all thought that was good cause we wanted all kids. You know, blacks, whites, rich or poor. We wanted to take all kids.

MH- I see,

H- You see, if the principals originally installed had been followed it would have been a viable program

MH-I see. What were the original principals?

H- Well, we wanted Straight to have a heart, we felt the Seed had lost that, they had forgotten they were dealing with children. We wanted to take the good from the Seed and leave the bad. The problem was that Mel brought most of the troublemakers from the Seed with him. That was the whole idea behind the heart logo. We wanted Straight to have a heart. You see, at the Seed if you didn't do right they would shun you, the kids at school and stuff. We wanted none of that. No shunning. We wanted the kids no we cared. We wanted Straight to have a heart.

MH- I remember that logo.

H- Thing was all the sudden the building wasn't good enough.

MH- What do you mean when you say the building wasn't good enough?

H- You see I guess I started or the idea started about April 75 and we had a goal to move into the building by Sept 1, 1975 and myself and another parent worked hours and hours with cleaning up this building. When we got it, it had all kinds of music stuff in it. It had been used for storage and we had to clean it up, build walls, bring it to code stuff like that. I was in charge of that. I kept a logbook of everything we did to that building. I remember one day Laura, Charlie Morgan's wife walking in while I was writing in my book and she said H what are you doing? I said "Well, I keep a log of all that we do to the building and I'm writing down item number 71, see we have completed these 71 things. She said "Good lord H that's not a log that's a book". I just tossed that logbook bout 3 or 4 years ago, didn't think I would ever need it again. You know, how you go through your house and do the thorough cleaning. Well, I was moving into a condo and had to clean out some stuff. Then wasn't long before they started pulling dirty stunts.

MH- What do you mean dirty stunts and who is they?

H-Suddenly the building wasn't good enough. Suddenly they wanted a different building, in a different neighborhood. Now, I'm not saying that Mel is prejudice; I'm just saying it felt like all they started to want was white kids.

MH- I see, May I ask you what prompted you to leave in such a short time?

H- Well, one thing was the "Come Down" raps were getting way out of hand.

MH- Can you explain to me what you mean by "out of hand".

H- Well you see in the seed, only the senior staff could do come down wraps cause they were trained people, or were kids in the program that had been through the program and knew what they were talking about. I started to hear from some of my foster children that they were letting everybody do the "Come down" raps. You know, like even newcomers who had no idea what they were talking about, the whole group was doing it and it didn't matter if they knew what they were saying was true or not. That bothered me a lot. You have to be careful with the "Come down" raps cause they can destroy someone's mind for good.

MH-You said "one thing" that bothered you, was there more?

H - Yes,

MH- Can you share that with me?

H- well a lot of us were starting to get the cold shoulder, like we didn't matter to the other executives. We didn't like that, we didn't want any part of that shunning business. We wanted Straight to have a heart and another thing I was starting to get feedback from other kids that they weren't getting anything out of the program.

MH- I see

H- Mel use to call me "boy" like he was some master or something and the building was not being maintained. They wouldn't clean up at night or they would leave coffee pots on which is a fire hazard. We would put up light fixtures and soon they would be no light fixture and bulb just hanging from the ceiling with wires exposed. You know here we were trying to teach these kids to take pride in themselves, take care of themselves and they weren't taking care of the building.

MH- So the building was not properly maintained

H. No, it wasn't and I'll be honest with you. One night they called me and asked me to go to the building and see if I could fix the safe. They couldn't get in it that day. So, I went to the building and when I walked in I saw this light that was left on just dangling from the ceiling, it was one of the ones we had put a new fixture on. I'm not so sure we wouldn't have had a fire that night if I hadn't walked in. So, I turned the light off and went about fixing the safe. Well I got the safe open, and what do I find but a big bag of marijuana that was suppose to have already been turned over to the police. You see we had a policy that any drugs found on kids would be turned over to the police within three days.

MH-So it was there longer than three days?

H-Yes.

MH- How do you know that?

H- Well , you see the first fifty kids in the program were screened very thoroughly about five hours or so with them and their parents. You see, we insisted on parental involvement because if the kid didn't have the right environment to return to or the parents weren't involved then it was a waste of time. So, we screened the kids and I imagine that, that is when the pot was found, when those kids were first brought in. That just won't fly. I mean here we are a drug rehab and they are keeping pot in the safe.

MH- Did you say anything?

H- Yes, that's what prompted my leaving you see I had these complaints and I drafted a letter. Oh and Helen Peterman , you've heard of her?

MH- Yes, I have.

H- Well, she was another problem. She was, well, I don't know how to put it. Hitler. Is the only way to put it. She was very dictatorial, no warmth She came in there like these kids are rotten and she didn't care how they felt they were gonna do what she said. She loved the come down raps. You could see she loved every minute of it. That bothered me, we wanted Straight to have a heart and remember these are children we are dealing with. In fact, the vote to bring her in was one short of denial.

MH- She had only a high school diploma is that right or no she was a drop out.

H- I was gonna say if that, I don't think she even had her high school diploma. Then they brought in this guy Jim Hertz, you've heard of him?

MH-Yes, what his position?

H- Well, he was introduced to us as someone who was a good youth administrator. I think the only reason Helen voted him it was because she could control him. I think that was Jim's problem cause he was basically a good guy but Helen had him wrapped around her finger.

MH-You mentioned earlier that you wrote a letter. What happened when you wrote the letter?

H- Well, as I say I wrote this letter which prompted an executive meeting. In fact I remember telling one of the executives that we had better leave because if they continue like this we are going to be in court more times then we can count , cause they will get sued.

MH- Do you remember that meeting?

H- Quite well.

MH- Can you tell me about it?

H-Well they had my list of issues and there were a lot of people on the board on my side, like. Anyway, I'll never forget it. Betty (Mel's wife) started out with "Pleasure to see you again". Then she read the issues and then she started "You son of bitch who do you think you are to question anything my husband does". Well that was it for me, I got up and was walking out and she was still yelling when I walked out the door. I think a few others might have walked with me too. I walked out and never looked back.

MH- So, us hearing that about eleven of you all left very early on Is true then?

H-Yes, its true, if they didn't leave that day, it was shortly after that.

MH- So, that is the day you left correct?

H- Yes,

MH- When was that do you recall?

H-Well lets see, I was only there about a year, year and a half so if I started in April of 1975 it would have 1976 or early 1977.

MH- Are you aware of the number of suicides among children that were in Straight. Some that are directly related to Straight and others we can't prove are because of Straight but a lot of the circumstantial evidence points to that in my opinion and some of these suicides happened either while on staff or shortly after leaving the program. Were you aware of any of this?

H-.....

MH- are you there?

H- Yes, (crying)I'm here. Suicides? Oh my God.....I didn't knowOh God...I'm so sorry...

MH- Are you aware of the past and present allegations against Straight for abuse?

H-Abuse, like child abuse?

MH-Yes, like not receiving medical treatment, lack of food, liquids, sleep and being pinned to a floor with people sitting on every part of your body, or girls being raped by executive staff, guy newcomers getting raped in their foster homes and it never being reported, or one case where a girl watched her brothers head thrown threw a wall and is jumped up out of group to save him she was tackled and restrained by twenty or thirty girls and pinned to the floor as she listened to her brother scream. No, privacy, not being allowed to go to the bathroom by yourself. Not able to read ANYTHING including the bible until second phase that would include a billboard sign on the way in to the building.

MH- are you there?

H- Yes, a moment.....(crying)

MH- Pause.....

H-(still crying)Oh my God.....I'm so sorry.....I'm so sorry.....Oh God.....I didn't know.....when I left I left and never looked back. Every time I saw an article in the paper on straight I would just throw it away. Over the years I may have heard one or two things but you know when kids get into group they brag about the drugs they did. I thought maybe it was just a few kids going overboard or something. Oh.....MY God.....abuse.....oh God.....

MH- I don't usually share this with the people I interview but you have been very honest with me. The reason the survivors have me doing these interview is because I am a survivor.

H- So you know first hand that its true.

MH-Yes, I do. In fact H, the stories I just gave you were my own except for one.

H-(crying)Oh My God.....I'm sorry.....I'm so sorry MH.....Oh God.....I wish I had never completed that building.....I feel like I built a building that killed kids.....I'm sorry....

MH- Its okay, I applaud you for having enough courage to leave. You weren't there when the abuse happened to me or when most of the abuse started or got way out of control.

H-(still crying).....Maybe I should have done or said something when I left.....Oh God.....I just left and never looked back . We never dreamed it would end up like that...None of us expected it to get like that.....I'm so Sorry....maybe we should have done more than just walk out.

MH-Its okay your talking to me now...and .. You know I have been fighting Straight since I was 17 I am 37 now. In all those years, in all those court cases, civil suits, articles and interview, NOT ONCE..NOT ONCE did I ever hear anyone say they were sorry. You don't know how healing that is to hear even though you weren't there when it happened to me. Just you talking helps.

H-(Still crying)You know, that was always an unfinished chapter in my life. I just walked maybe this Gods way of helping me to close that chapter. I'm a very religious man. I'll help anyway that I can. I will do anything I can to help you survivors. You know I have a lot of church projects going on but maybe this is Gods way of telling me what I'm suppose to be doing.

MH-Thank-you hep, you know if your just willing to tell people what the original intentions were that helps. A lot of us survivors have been walking around for years thinking "Who dreams up this hell", "What kind of sick person starts a program like this".

H-III be happy to talk to any of them. That WAS NOT THE ORIGINAL INTENTION. We wanted to help kids all kids. We wanted Straight to have a heart to remember they were dealing with children... OH MY God.....how many kids went through the program?

MH - Close to or over twenty thousand

H- OH....MY God.....NO.....Oh God.....

MH- You know hep I've talked to about 150 survivors or more. NOT ONE that I know of has not attempted suicide,

H—HOLYOH my God.....IM SORRY.....I wish I had never, ever finished that building...

MH-its okay, you can help now, just by talking to the survivors or even talking to that original eleven or so that left and asking them to share their story with us.

H-Yes, hang on I think I have some names and numbers for you.

MH- gives MH some information

H- I'll do anything I can to help.

MH- Well if you could help us with that original eleven that would be great. You know a lot of survivors are real attached to that Morgan Yacht building but we think the current owner is somehow tied to Sembler so it might be hard for us to get it. Maybe someone in that original eleven can help us get that building. We want to put a memorial in the big group room.

H- (tearing up again) A memorial.....oh..wow.....that would be great.....I'm so sorry for what happened to you and everyone MH. You can give my phone number out to any survivor; I'll try to talk to the one's I know and see if we can't do something. You give my number to anyone that needs to know what the original plan was or needs to hear that at one point it was an idea about helping and caring NOT destroying. Have you talked to Charlie?

MH- Yes, I spoke with him last night. I didn't go into all the details about the abuse. I just wanted his advise on the building. I'm supposed to call him back. He said he would help any way he can.

H- You should tell him. Charlie Morgan is a great guy and he will help. You call me anytime MH ANYTIME...

MH- Thank- you . I really appreciate you talking to me..

H-It's the least I can do and if I can talk to those others I will.

MH-Okay,, interview ended discussing Bucs game on TV..