

Straight program on trial - Plaintiff a teen client 8 years ago

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ST. PETERSBURG -- Straight Inc. has been on trial this week in a 5-year-old lawsuit that accuses drug-treatment program employees of abusing a young patient and holding her against her will.

In March 1982, the then-17-year-old Jacksonville girl was placed by relatives in the St. Petersburg program, where she remained until September 1983, according to the lawsuit.

During her 17 months in the program, Karen Norton contends, she was harassed, annoyed, embarrassed and mocked by Straight employees bent on humiliating and upsetting her.

"We deny all the allegations," Straight spokeswoman Joy Margolis said Friday. "We still have not as yet had our day in court."

Norton's lawsuit accuses Straight of holding her against her will despite repeated pleas to leave, and accuses the drug treatment program of assault and battery.

She claims she was thrown up against a wall by a doctor, strip-searched and jeered-at by staff members, intimidated, bruised, cursed and forced to exercise despite complaining she was in pain.

After Straight staff members forced her to continue exercising, Norton collapsed and was rushed to a hospital for an emergency appendectomy, according to her lawsuit.

The St. Petersburg-based Straight is expected to present witnesses in its defense next week, according to Karen A. Barnett, Norton's lawyer. Barnett presented her client's case this past week.

Margolis said she did not work for Straight in 1982 and "essentially none of the present management" did either.

"I'm basing my denial on everything I've heard that's gone on and talking to our lawyers," Margolis said.

Margolis acknowledged there has been controversy in the past concerning Straight.

The drug treatment program agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars in settlements to other former patients who complained of being held by Straight against their will.

One former patient was awarded \$220,000 in 1983 in a federal lawsuit against Straight.

"It's significantly changed from what it was to what it is today," Margolis said. "We have probably one of the highest success rates of any treatment program for adolescents."

Margolis said. "I know they've saved thousands of lives,"

In 1984, Straight officials were warned by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) to stop coercing teen-agers into drug treatment or risk losing their state license.

HRS alleged then that teen-agers had been coerced or tricked into submitting to treatment, that Straight had failed to report child abuse and did not provide adequate supervision or medical treatment for patients.

In June 1989, Straight's license to operate in Florida was renewed by HRS for only three months. Such licenses are normally renewed for a year.

HRS officials cited a state report that patients only had limited access to an abuse hotline, some patients were

allowed to overpower other patients, bathroom privileges were restricted for some patients and some records were sloppy or incomplete.

After discussions with HRS officials, Straight's license was renewed in September 1989 for a full year. It was again renewed for a full year in September 1990, HRS spokeswoman Elaine Fulton-Jones said Friday.

"We've had real success in working together with them," Fulton-Jones said Friday. "We were able ... to come to an understanding."

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