

Director, Youth Will Discuss Drug Experiences, 'Straight' Program

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Jim Hartz, director of Straight Inc., a drug rehabilitation program for youth in St. Petersburg, will bring two young people with him who have reformed with the help of his program to address the North Tampa Chamber of Commerce Tuesday.

Phyllis Ellis, chamber president, said the chamber decided to host Straight because of the stigma attached to drug use among young people.

The philosophy of Straight is family oriented. The program works not only to help the drug abuser, but also to help the family learn how to deal with their feelings.

"These kids really get to you," Hartz said.

Two teenagers from Straight will be telling their personal stories of drug involvement and how they were able to get "straight" again at the 7:30 p.m. meeting Tuesday at Florida Federal Savings and Loan Association, 202 W. Bearss Ave.

"So many of our youth are still involved (in drugs)," Ellis said. "There is still a stigma attached on the part of the families. Parents who suspect that their kids might be on drugs can come to Tuesday's meeting without being noticed and find out how to get help," she said.

Help is exactly what Straight Inc. provides its clients and their families. Hartz said the program has about a 50 percent success rate in rehabilitating teenagers who have been heavily involved in drugs.

For Straight Inc., success is attained when a client completes the organization's rehabilitation program and then remains, what Hartz terms, drug free for one year. The organization keeps track of clients' behavior after leaving the program through followup questionnaires.

Hartz said that the organization is a non-profit, tax exempt day care facility licensed by HRS.

It was organized in September of 1976 when a group of about 25 Pinellas county residents joined together to try and do something about the drug problem among teenagers, he explained.

Hartz said the program has a philosophy similar to that of Alcoholics Anonymous. Straight's rehabilitation program is broken into five phases.

In the first phase, the client leaves school and reports to Straight's facility located at 2501 72 St. N. in Petersburg, from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Here he participates in group activities during the day. In addition, during this first phase, he is matched with another client who is in the advanced stages of the program.

The two youngsters are paired according to age, sex and background. The new client leaves his home and moves in with the other client and his family, Hartz explained.

"This gives the youngster and his family the time they need away from each other," Hartz said.

Once the staff feels the client is performing well, he enters phase two of the rehabilitation program. In this phase the client returns to his family.

In phase three, the client returns to school. Hartz noted that Straight clients usually have academic success upon returning to school. Many of the youngsters are near failure when they leave school to enter the rehabilitation program, Hartz said. When they return most start making good grades, he said.

Phase four of the program has the youngsters backing out of daily visits to Straight's facility and by phase five the kids are only visiting the center three days a week. Youngsters who have advanced to the fifth phase spend much of their time helping newcomers, Hartz said.

Hartz said he feels one of the real strengths of the program is the open meeting. At these gatherings the clients are seated on one side of the auditorium at the Straight center. Across the room, sit their parents.

The meetings involve the clients addressing the parents, introducing themselves and talking about their feelings. The parents also discuss their feelings when they stand to address the youngsters.

Hartz said another strong facet of the program are the Saturday "raps" for the brothers and sisters of the clients. These are sessions for the clients' children to talk about their feelings.

"We started it (the raps) on a six-week trial basis and the parents wouldn't let us give it up," said Hartz.

Straight is governed by a 19-member board of directors. The staff consists of executive director Hartz, an assistant director, a group staff of 15 persons who have completed the rehabilitation program and a six-member support staff.

President Ellis said the chamber feels it has a responsibility to make people aware of the drug problem.