

Clients offer mixed views on programs

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ST. PETERSBURG - Barbara [REDACTED] had a demanding job, a father on his death bed, and a 38-year-old brother whose drug and alcohol abuse led him to an early grave.

She was a single mom who worried when she caught her 15-year-old son, Jay, sneaking out of the house at night. Jay hung out with a rough crowd, and she suspected he might be involved with drugs.

[REDACTED], like hundreds of other parents over the past 17 years, turned to Straight Inc., an adolescent drug treatment program.

Following a brief evaluation at the St. Petersburg treatment center, Straight employees convinced [REDACTED] her son was a drug abuser. She placed him in treatment in November 1989.

Today, [REDACTED], 39, believes she was duped and that all Straight wanted was her money. What she and Jay really needed was some family counseling, she said.

"I'm totally amazed I fell for this," [REDACTED] said. "It's a ploy on single parents."

Straight played on her vulnerabilities, she said. When she wanted to take her son out of the program, [REDACTED] said she was told, "You don't want him to die like your brother, do you?"

For a time, she said, she wasn't allowed to see her son.

"They were abusing him so badly they were afraid that he'd tell me," she said, recounting how he was poked and prodded until he was bruised, spit at and physically restrained. "There is no way on God's earth this is treatment."

[REDACTED] took him out of the program in May 1990.

"It took us two years to get to a normal relationship," she said. "He had always trusted me. For a while he was violent, uncontrollable."

After spending nine months in a Sarasota program, today, Jay is fine, she said.

But the bitterness remains for her and her son.

"I feel so stupid for being fooled by these people," she said.

Stories similar to the [REDACTED] abound. But there also are many like Mike Mahoney's.

"I wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for Straight," said Mahoney, 26, of Largo.

When he was 16 he smoked pot, drank and was in trouble with the law. In 1983, his father put him into the program, where he spent two years. He was about three-fourths of the way through it when he turned 18 and took off.

"They couldn't keep me there," he said.

Mahoney chose to return to the program a year later after committing a dozen felonies and becoming a cocaine addict.

Straight "probably did some things that maybe they shouldn't have," Mahoney said, referring to allegations of

abuse. But he said the program needed to be tough on drug abusers who didn't want to cooperate.

"Back in '83 it was real rough - but the people [clients] were real rough," he said.

Looking back, Mahoney said it was just the program he needed.

"That by far is the best treatment center I've ever seen or heard about," he said. "It's kids helping kids."

Roberta Yancey was involved with Straight off and on from 1982 to 1991.

She started as a host parent when her 15-year-old son, [REDACTED], was in the program. [REDACTED] never graduated from the program and left after spending 15 months at the St. Petersburg center and nine months at the Marietta, Ga., facility.

But Yancey credits Straight with introducing him to a course of recovery.

"They started it," she said. "It was like a springboard."

As a host parent, Yancey, 53, housed 27 different teen-agers in her St. Petersburg home. Today, 24 of them are still drug free, she said.

She went to work at Straight, first as a receptionist, and later helped the center come into compliance with state regulations.

Helping her son and other teens through recovery "has completely changed my life," she said. "It's been a joy."

Yancey went back to school and got a master's degree in counseling. Today, she works with adolescents who are substance abusers.

[REDACTED], now 26, has been clean for four years.

"It's incredible. It's unbelievable ... I believed it."

Richard Bradbury, 27, of Tampa, speaks in disbelief as he recounted his years with Straight.

Bradbury took nine months to "admit" he was a drug abuser - even though he says he'd only tried drugs experimentally before his parents put him in the program. His sister preceded him at Straight and Bradbury believes employees convinced his parents that he was at risk, too.

Physically mistreated by peers and counselors for denying his dependence on drugs, Bradbury finally "admitted" to using narcotics.

After graduating from the program in 1984, Bradbury worked at Straight, conducting aftercare rap sessions and group therapy sessions.

Bradbury said in talking to an old friend about the program, the questions he was asked opened his eyes.

The program is too much like a cult, he said.

"The treatment model is sick."

Caption: PHOTO(C)

(C) Barbara [REDACTED] enrolled her 15-year-old son, Jay, in the controversial Straight Inc. program in November 1989 and pulled him out in May 1990. She said that it took two years for them to achieve a normal relationship after he withdrew from the treatment center in St. Petersburg. RON J. BERARD/Tribune photo <FILED: STRAIGHT INC.>

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Page: 1

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