

DOWN THE STRAIGHT PATH - Critics say the anti-drug program employed abusive, cult-like methods and held clients against their will.

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ST. PETERSBURG - Like black jelly beans, liver and the Dallas Cowboys - Straight Inc. either is loved or hated.

The national adolescent drug treatment center, which recently shut its doors in St. Petersburg, evokes strong and diverse sentiments.

"The only good Straight is a dead Straight," said Janet Kennedy, a pharmacist and hospital administrator in Austin, Texas, who fought to close the Dallas program in 1991 after a friend was held there against her will.

Susan Brimmer, a St. Petersburg mother, represents the other extreme.

"I truly believe my son wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for Straight."

Over the course of 17 years, Straight often found itself in the national spotlight.

The program developed an aura of prestige when it was hailed during visits by then-first lady Nancy Reagan and then-Vice President George Bush.

Two members of Straight's board of directors, Mel Sembler and Joseph Zappala, co-chaired state fund-raising efforts for Bush's 1988 campaign. Each made \$125,000 contributions to the Republican National Committee for use in the GOP campaign. They were rewarded with ambassadorships to Australia and Spain, respectively.

During that time, Republicans touted Straight as a model program. Brimmer and her husband were named Bush's 656th "Point of Light" for their work with the program.

Yet Straight's credibility gradually eroded.

Allegations of abuse popped up along with claims Straight was cult-like, held people against their will, and stripped them of their privacy and rights.

Pickersets marched outside Straight facilities and scores of lawsuits were filed throughout the nation, alleging physical abuse.

Today, Straight faces state and FBI investigations.

Straight officials won't discuss the program, pending investigations, or its future.

The lettering identifying the St. Petersburg facility has been stripped off the green corporate headquarters and beige treatment center, leaving only faint imprints on the abandoned buildings.

A "for sale" sign sits in parched grass facing Gandy Boulevard. Telephones have been disconnected.

The treatment center closed in April, sending most of the 16 remaining clients to Straight's Marietta, Ga., facility. Straight executives then began dismantling the corporate headquarters.

Only the Georgia facility and a treatment center outside Detroit remain open, but officials there are uncertain of their fate.

Caption: PHOTO 2(1C)

(C) The Straight Inc. building in St. Petersburg stands empty. The drug-treatment center closed in April, and

many of the remaining clients were sent to Straight's Marietta, Ga., facility. Only the Georgia facility and a treatment center outside Detroit remain open, but officials are uncertain of their fate. A Straight brochure says it has helped more than 50,000 family members since its inception and that 70 percent of its graduates remain drug free. Straight now faces state and FBI investigations. Tribune file photo <FILED: STRAIGHT INC.> Susan and Terry Brimmer stand in her office. They were named one of former President Bush's 1,000 Points of Light for their work. JAY CONNER/Tribune photo <FILED: STRAIGHT INC.>

Memo: (See related story, same page.)

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