THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

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The Tribune begins a three-day examination of the Pinellas County drug rehabilitation center, Straight. Tampa free-lance writer Irv Edelson spent weeks talking to teen-agers in the program, parents, counselors and officials of Straight. Today's articles give an overall view of Straight's uncompromising approach to drug abuse as well as some of the criticisms leveled at its methods.
— Editor

Getting Straight

Inside the converted warehouse, bright lights hanging from the rafters make the scene reminiscent of a basketball arena. Parents sit apprehensively in wooden chairs on one side; teen-aged boys and girls crowd the other, separated by a narrow aisle. A select few youths stand in the background.

Fidgeting on the front row in jeans, dirty white sneakers and a loose-fitting blouse with an open neckline, a young girl twirls her thumbs to pass the time. Her blond hair rests on her shoulders as she grasps a microphone offered by an older woman, rises and begins to talk rapidly.

"My name is Joan (not her real name). I am 14. I've been here five days. I did pot, alcohol, hash, ups, downs, prescriptions, cocaine, morphine, speed, plastic. I did those drugs for a year and a half."

Later that night, a station wagon drives across Howard Frankland Bridge loaded with teen-agers heading for a home in Hillsborough County. Inside, a 17-year-old girl is berating another girl: "You're gross. You're an a------. You let down your father. You let down your friends. You're not straight, Cherry. I don't want anything to do with you."

A television plot? It could be, but it isn't. The only TV look-alike is the rerun aspect. Those scenes are rerun daily at Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg, where former drug abusers team with parents, professional counselors and other volunteers in a 24-hour battle to salvage the minds of teen-agers bitten by the drug bug.

Straight, in many cases, is the court of last resort. To many parents, it's the final grasp, after psychiatrists and counselors have failed and sons and daughters face a fearful future of drug overdose, crime, prostitution or the ultimate — premature death.

And, even then, the rate of success at Straight, one of America's most successful drug rehabilitation programs, is only about 50 percent of those who complete its stringent regimen.

As James E. Hartz, hard-working, determined "iron man" of Straight, will tell you: "You don't become addicted to drugs overnight, and you can't get off drugs in one night, either. It's a difficult struggle that requires the determination and motivation of the entire Straight team — but particularly the victim. And the tremendous sacrifices must be shared in full by the parents to make it work."

Straight, like drug rehabilitation centers across the nation, was born of necessity. It was designed to answer the pathetic whimpers and cries of a teen-aged America gone astray, seeking answers to life in a drug culture bent on destruction rather than the salvation they seek.

How severe is the drug problem? *Parade* magazine quoted the General Accounting Office (GAC), the investigative arm of the U.S. Congress, as saying some 43 million Americans have smoked pot. Another 453,000 Americans use heroin every day, and nearly 10 million have tried cocaine.

"Illegal drug sales in the United States," said the GAC report, "have become a multibillion-dollar business, with the payments by users and traffickers for heroin, cocaine, marijuana, hashish and other dangerous drugs estimated to be between $35 billion and $52 billion annually.

"The U.S. economy is directly affected by these large sums of money," the report continued, "helping to corrupt legitimate business and expand opportunities for organized crime. Drug trafficking in the U.S. today appeals to people from all walks of life, including doctors, lawyers, accountants, businessmen and entertainers."

These doctors and other professionals are well represented among the parents of teen-agers in the Straight program. All are willing to give testimony to the parent who says: "It couldn't happen to my son (or daughter)."

Straight was founded Sept. 1, 1976, by leaders seeking new ways to provide a different kind of freedom for Bay area youths: freedom from the bonds of drugs.

Some may call it deprograming. Others may say Straight brainwashes. Hartz calls it "peer pressure." Parents say restoration of faith and self-esteem in the teen-ager is what does it. Some abusers well advanced toward rehabilitation will say: "It's love. I love myself now."

Whatever the case, Straight has given many teen-aged drug users a new lease on life. Perhaps one key to Straight's success is its independence from government funding and the snarls of red tape.

Non-profit and privately funded, Straight is a family oriented drug rehabilitation program for the teen-aged drug abuser. Its financial support comes from the families served, concerned citizens and groups.

Since its beginning, Straight has accepted about 1,200 young people into the program, graduating 325 of them back into society, Hartz said. (About 600 dropped out for various reasons, but 300 are going through the program currently.) He added that 50 percent of the 325 graduates have remained free of drug or alcohol use for at least a year. Even among the 600 dropouts, a number are known to be drug-free.

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A young girl tearfully tells her story counselors and parents. — Tribune ar

Straight

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Straight operates with a set of officers, a board of directors, an advisory committee and a working staff composed of Hartz as administrator, until recently, Dr. George Ross, a certified rational-behavior therapist, and Helen Peterman, an experienced lay counselor with an amazing perception of human behavior, as assistant directors; and a team of well-trained paraprofessionals from the ranks of rehabilitated drug abusers.

Straight works with a budget of $250,000, the average cost per parent at approximately $1,000. Contributions through the foster home-care concept and food from parents help cut costs.

Although opened to provide a cure for adolescents in Pinellas County with drug-abuse problems, Straight has opened its doors to residents of the entire Bay area, from Venice north to Land O' Lakes.

Twenty to 25 percent of the Straight enrollment now comes from Hillsborough County. In addition to the assistance of parents, Straight also receives the help of many other Hillsborough County residents, including businessmen Sonny Burnett, president of Jack's Cookies; Jerry Lane, a Brandon builder, and Joseph Garcia, a Tampa attorney.

Garcia is Hillsborough County coordinator for Straight's new building that opened in July on Gandy Boulevard between state Route 275 and U.S. 19.

"For the first time ever, Straight has a much-needed modern facility at a location that will make it as accessible to most parts of Hillsborough County as it now is to Pinellas County," Garcia said.

Straight operates much in the pattern of Alcoholics Anonymous, including the element of confidentiality in shielding the names of its clients. Straight's program has seven steps instead of AA's 12 steps.

The daily routine is reinforced by a set of 35 rules, with honesty heading the list. This ties in with the first step: A person must admit that he or she has a problem (drugs) that requires help from "a power greater than ourselves."

The entire concept is based on giving the teen-ager a new lifestyle, one without drugs and with love, honesty, understanding and a strong feeling for God. While prayer and meditation play a major role in the Straight philosophy, the religious aspect is strictly non-denominational. Protestants, Catholics and Jews all are represented among the youngsters trying to reroute their lives with the help of Straight.

Although teens who have progressed in the program swear by Straight, many did not come willingly into the program. Most were coerced by fed-up parents or guardians or were brought in physically or under threat of jail. Some were fearful because of unfounded stories of physical abuse, or because of separation from drug-taking friends and their source of supply.

Bob (not his real name), a 17-year-old, is a product of a broken marriage who had been living in New Orleans in his own apartment, hoping to become a rock musician. His drug use spanned four years and included nine different types, ranging from pot to mushrooms, acid and cocaine. His mother had to literally kidnap him to get him into Straight.

Bob came in weighing 130 pounds, with hair below his waist, long sideburns, his shirt unbuttoned to his navel. He was wearing two necklaces, two rings and a copper bracelet.

"The first thing they (Straight counselors) did was to boot away the scarf I had around my neck," Bob said. "I don't have hair down below my shoulders now, nor do I wear jewelry or dress immodestly. I weigh 160 pounds, and I'm a lot happier."

Linda (not her real name), a pug-nosed 15-year-old with a lovable pixie face and long, dark hair woven into a ponytail, could captivate your heart with a brief glance into her dancing, dark eyes. Her silk shirt and blue jeans are typical of her generation. To look at her, you have to wonder: Could she possibly be a drug user?

Don't let the innocent appearance fool you. Linda was hooked sufficiently at 15 to have a regular habit of pot (marijuana), alcohol, hash (hashish), downers (barbiturates) and THC (a mild hallucinogen that is part of the cannabis marijuana family, comes in powder form and can be snorted, smoked or injected. THC is actually the pure form of marijuana).

Linda had been well-acquainted with Straight because her brother was in the program. "I didn't want to come in," she said, "because I would have to give up my druggie friends. I wouldn't be 'Miss Popular' any more. And that scared the daylights out of me because friends were everything to me."

Being popular, wanting to be liked, the desire to be "cool" with one's peers, being bored and looking for excitement seemed to be predominant motives for teens going the drug route. The youngsters interviewed at Straight all started either with alcohol or marijuana and moved on to other drugs from there.

They were stoned at home, at school and at church. School was a major source of drugs, and several of the Straight clients became dealers to feed their habits. One St. Petersburg youth said his major source for drugs was his hairdresser in Bradenton.

And sometimes, according to Arthur (not his real name), it was just this simple: "I would go to a friend's house, and he just went to his medicine cabinet, took out a bottle (prescription medicine) and we popped it (a pill) into our mouths. I didn't even know what I was taking. It was some of his dad's sinus medicine."

In Bob's case, he was exposed to drug users by his father's friends. "I thought druggies were happy and I wanted to be accepted by them. So I smoked pot, and within three months I was doing ups (stimulants) and downs (depressants) and anything I could get my hands on. I was stealing pills from my aunts and uncles and giving them to my friends."

And there was Debbie, who met a group of older girls shortly after moving to Florida from New Jersey. Pot was the game, and Debbie wanted to be accepted. So one day when one of the girls offered to sell her some pot, she did what was expected of her.

"I bought a couple of joints off her, and I smoked them. The next day I bought more, and the next day it was more, and the next week it was still more, and I was drinking at the same time. I'm 16 now." (Their rendezvous was usually behind the barn where she kept the horse her father bought her to keep her away from drugs.)

The results were pretty much the same: Poor attitudes at home, grades going down at school, changing personality, erratic behavior, defiance of parents, skipping school and even running away.

Usually it takes a real shocker, a crisis of some magnitude, to turn a drug abuser around, reeling toward rehabilitation. But sometimes even a fatal overdose by a close friend isn't enough to cure a user. He or she must have outside help. Straight has been the source of that help for teen-agers who have successfully completed the program during its four years of existence.

Unfortunately, Straight has neither staff nor funding to accommodate all Tampa Bay area drug abusers. Nor does Straight maintain a swinging door for abusers to enter and leave as they please. Straight demands a commitment from both user and parents, one that involves financial input (scaled to means), time and effort.

To see Straight for the first time at an open meeting is to get hooked. No movie — "Orphan Train" or "Holocaust" — can tug at your heartstrings more effectively than seeing a 13-year-old stand up in wrinkled jeans or flowered shirt and shout across the room, "Mom, I love you. I'm coming home," and then run and fling his arms around her.

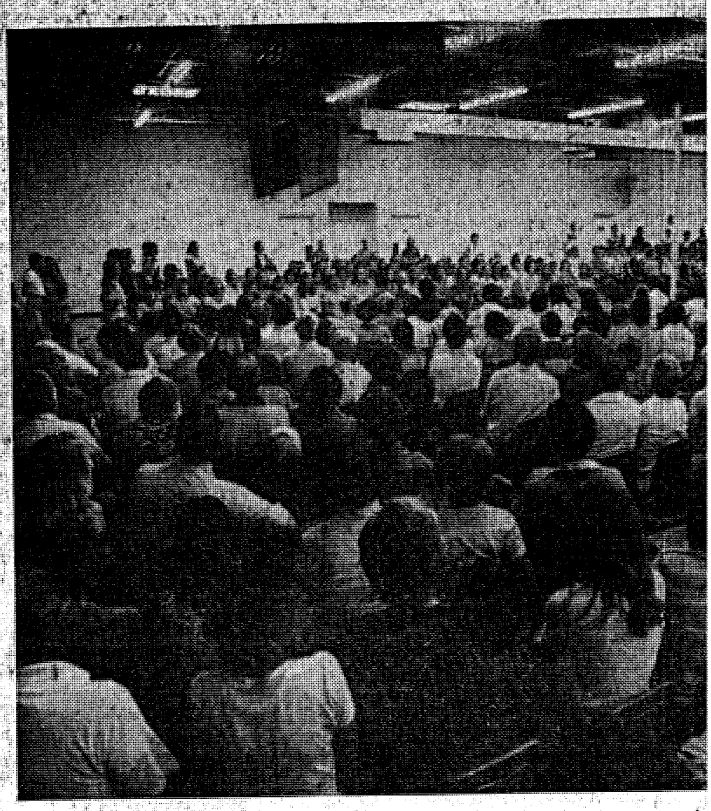
When a youngster comes into Straight, he comes as a resident, separated from his home environment, for a minimum of two weeks up to 30 days. Not even the parent knows where the son or daughter is staying.

Nights are spent in another home with a foster parent, who also has a child in the program. The newcomer is transported to Straight in St. Petersburg each morning and picked up at night.

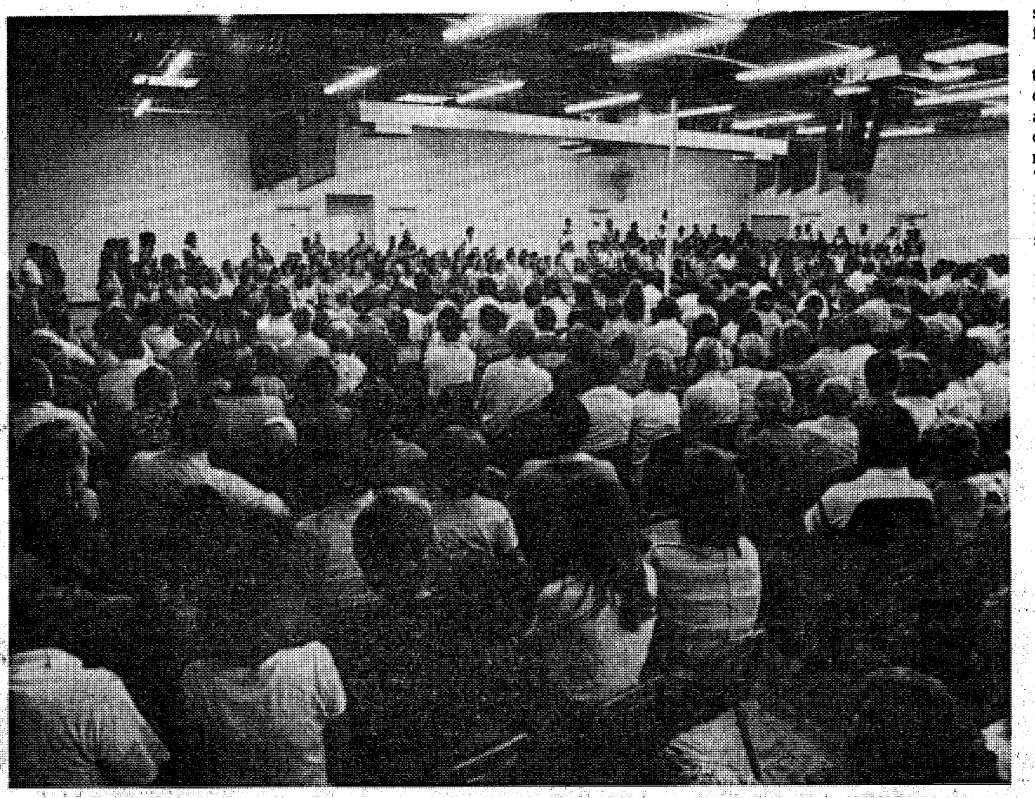
Straight's entry procedure involves an intake session of two to three hours of intense questioning about drug history and drug-using friends. A newcomer is thoroughly searched for drugs (no drugs or alcohol are permitted at Straight by client, parent, volunteer or staffer) and introduced to the group.

From then on, he or she is labeled by his phase (1 through 5), which symbolizes his progress toward total rehabilitation.

In Phase One, the youngster is removed from school and placed in a



Parents, counselors and youngsters currently in the Straight program meet session. — Tribune photo by Doug Pizac



Parents, counselors and youngsters currently in the Straight program meet at a Friday night session. — Tribune photo by Doug Pizac

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From then on, he or she is labeled by his phase (1 through 5), which symbolizes his progress toward total rehabilitation.

In Phase One, the youngster is removed from school and placed in a completely controlled environment with a 12-hour, daily routine of individual counseling, group rap sessions and informational periods. Until the newcomer begins to respond to the program, he is not allowed to speak or move around without supervision.

The Phase One youth is held by the belt as he is escorted to the car in which he will be riding between Straight headquarters and his foster home. That represents the loss of freedom that he can regain only by progressing into the Phase Two level.

Separation from home is usually a minimum of 14 days, but can be extended up to a period of several weeks or months, depending upon the stability and behavior of the youngster — and his desire to earn his way out of the foster home design. One of his major goals is to be able to return home.

Placing children in a foster home offers a therapeutic point of view for parents, Hartz maintains. "It serves as a buffer zone between them and their children. A father learns to adjust to his own son or daughter being on drugs through another boy or girl. A warm and loving relationship develops between foster parents and children that spreads to all members of the Straight family."

In the second phase, a youngster returns home nightly after attending all-day sessions at Straight that run from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and 2 p.m. to 9 p.m., Sunday. He now has earned the status of a "responsible person" and has assumed responsibility for another youngster. He must also learn to set priorities and start developing a family relationship.

In the third phase, the child is allowed to return to school and attend the Straight program daily after school and weekends. The youngster's home now becomes another temporary foster home in which the youngster oversees directly the new boy or girl coming into the program. In essence, he starts developing his educational and vocational pursuits.

Two goals are added in the fourth phase: developing friendships and learning how to use leisure time creatively or meaningfully.

In the fifth and final phase, a three-day-a-week schedule permits the practice of values achieved. The "student" is eligible to train as a paraprofessional. Called "the sharing stage," the fifth phase teaches how to "give back" to those who have helped.

Says Hartz: "The goals of Straight are to help the youngster learn how to change his values, to view his attitudes and to perceive his strengths. He learns to better perceive the goals of social values, peer response and philosophical integration of adolescence into adulthood. There is constant open dialogue with the youngster."

What makes Straight different from other drug-rehabilitation programs?

One difference is the intense parent involvement: in open meetings, rap sessions, as foster parents and in driving their children to and from Straight. If a parent has foster children to be delivered and picked up, and a child in school to be taken there after class, he might make three separate trips to St. Petersburg each day.

The two open meetings are big pluses. Monday night, mandatory for parents of children in the first three phases, permits discussions of feelings and goals and a sharing of experiences between children and parents.

Following the meeting, parents and their children attend a mandatory rap session designed to get parents thinking about the function of the program, to develop an understanding of the child and what is going through his mind.

Friday's open meeting is mandatory for all. But the rap session afterwards is elective for parents. It is directed by a staff member and excludes the children. Topics vary, including marital problems, rational thinking, coping with emotions, etc.

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Several times a year, weekend sessions are held for parents, all designed to help them build a better foundation of strength and determination in coping with their particular problem.

Miller Newton, son of a former *Tribune* managing editor, the late V.M. "Red" Newton, became acquainted with Straight as director of the Florida Alcohol Coalition. He was so impressed that he resigned his FAC position to join the Straight staff.

Interviewed before he made the move, Newton remarked: "Straight is a dynamite program. It's the most committed and effective program for young people who are involved in alcohol and drug abuse in this area. Peer pressure gets youngsters into drugs, and Straight uses that same peer pressure to reverse the process. The kids who are more advanced in the program are changing the attitudes — getting the lines reversed — of the ones just coming into the program."

Insisting Straight is much more effective than the much-publicized Houston program involving the daughter of comedian Carol Burnett, Newton said: "Straight is much more thorough in its understanding of the druggie culture — the customs that surround druggies, the attitudes. They (Straight) are not just concerned with getting the kids off drugs, but in getting at the negative attitudes behind the drug culture."

Straight's leaders say their efforts are aimed at accenting the positive.

Restoration of self-esteem was Straight's greatest contribution to Linda, who noted: "I love myself. That's the biggest thing. I've learned to accept me and appreciate me for what I am."

Bob has changed from a desire to become a long-haired rock star to wanting to become a staff member at Straight and go on to college. "I'm being honest with myself now," he said, having advanced to the Phase Five and resumed studies in the 12th grade as an A and B student.

For Arthur, his biggest contribution was realizing that "I'm normal" in not doing drugs. Being able to sit down and talk to his father, whom he despised when he was on drugs, is another jewel he gained from Straight.

Helping the youngsters come to grips with themselves is the Serenity Prayer, adopted by Straight from AA: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."