



# Straight's Parents

The hard-line drug rehabilitation program requires a heavy commitment of time, money and emotional support. A parent may drive up to 250 miles a day in order to get kids to sessions.

This is the second installment of a three-part Tribune series on Straight, the Pinellas County drug rehabilitation center. Tampa free-lance writer Irv Edelson spent weeks interviewing teenagers, parents and counselors in the program. — Editor

By IRV EDELSON

Shock, disbelief, indignation, guilt, depression.

Feelings vary for the parent suddenly discovering a son or daughter hooked on drugs. It's "heartbreak alley" for parents of abusers, often going from counselor to psychiatrist, seeking the answer, a solution to a child on drugs.

Lucky ones — if you call the parent of a drug-abuser lucky — are those who have "found" Straight Inc. on Gandy Boulevard in St. Petersburg.

Straight Inc., a non-profit drug rehabilitation center for teen-aged drug addicts, operates on funds provided by parents of youthful drug offenders and community-minded volunteers. It operates with strong emphasis on peer pressure and parent involvement.

Parents of Straight children vary in background, education and occupation. Many will tell you, "The only thing we have in common is that we're parents of addicts." And many have bitter feel-

their minds" with a group of other teens at a neighbor's birthday party. "I found out the grandmother bought the liquor for the 14-year-old's birthday party," Joan said. She later found out "every one of those kids' parents knew they were drinking at that party."

A call to the sheriff's office brought a deputy, who advised Joan, intent on filing charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor: "I hope you know there's not a thing you can do. The state of Florida seven years ago mandated that it was unconstitutional to arrest someone or to press charges against someone for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. And the kids know this."

Having heard about Straight, she asked the deputy about the program. He advised her against it: "They (your kids) are going to be thrown with a bunch of kids that are on hard drugs, and they're going to be worse after they come out than when they went in."

(The deputy's allegation was false. Straight does not handle hard addicts. Many of the kids have experimented with hard drugs but are not addicted to them. Such addicts would be referred to an institution better equipped to handle their problem, Straight officials said.)

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Parents of Straight children vary in background, education and occupation. Many will tell you, "The only thing we have in common is that we're parents of druggies." And many have bitter feelings toward teachers, neighbors, doctors, counselors or psychiatrists who knew — and didn't inform them — that their children were on drugs.

One mother travels 250 miles a day, making three trips daily to Straight from northern Hillsborough County, and another drives 800 miles a week from Sarasota to St. Petersburg to take her child and others she cares for in the Straight program to the sessions as required by the program.

Yet despite the hardships endured, all are grateful that their children are on the road to a new life without dependence upon drugs.

Joan (not her real name), the mother of three teen-aged children in Straight, said her son skipped 30 days of school before "someone at the school finally notified us he hadn't been in school."

Concerned that her son was "angry all the time, cutting school and never spent time at home except to feed his face and sleep," Joan took her son to a child psychiatrist "at \$60 an hour."

In an interview at Straight, Joan said: "The psychiatrist, of course, knew that Ronald was on drugs. He never said anything to us. But he did mention that maybe my son has a slight learning disability. And that is why he's having problems in school."

So Joan took Ronald to a clinical psychologist for learning disability tests costing \$375 to find out that maybe Ronald does have a slight learning disability. The psychologist informed his mother that "he does seem to resent any kind of authority from teachers, policemen, parents, anyone. He just refused to accept it."

The psychologist told Joan if her son's attitude did not change, he probably would end up in jail.

Not long afterward, Joan caught her

their minds" with a group of other teens at a neighbor's birthday party. "I found out the grandmother bought the liquor for the 14-year-old's birthday party," Joan said. She later found out "every one of those kids' parents knew they were drinking at that party."

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A week later her daughter was caught shoplifting, with drug paraphernalia in her purse, and her son was packing to leave home. A secretary at the time, Joan was advised to examine Straight by her boss — a man who had worked at Father Flanagan's Boys Town — and recognized the drug symptoms in her son.

Later, after her daughters were in Straight and confided in Joan, she was shocked to learn that when they spent the night at a neighbor's house, "this woman was taking my teen-aged daughters up and down the beaches at nighttime to bars, giving them pot and giving them pills."

When Joan notified the dean of boys that she was withdrawing her son from school to put him in Straight, he "shook me up" by telling her he had known Ronald was on drugs for the past year and a half, but the school principal had forbidden any teacher to mention to any parent the possibility of a child's being on drugs.

"Now, to me, that's criminal," Joan said.

A Sarasota parent said "I know of cases where teachers have been told 'If you talk to one more parent about their kid being on drugs, you are out of a job.' And I don't think that's right."

Tim, the Sarasota father, complained that teachers always told him at PTA meetings his daughter was doing fine. "Then she gets suspended and I'm not even told about it. I happened to guess right because she wasn't acting 'normal' when she came into the house. Otherwise, I wouldn't have known it."

Tim's wife, Marsha, said there was no evidence at home to pinpoint her daughter's pot smoking. "She never bought or paid for any pot that she ever smoked. Her friends gave it to her and the boy she was dating had a brother who was a dealer. The kids don't buy it; they share it."

And Tim noted: "Most of them



A mother and son talk intensely in a rare moment of cor of "deprogramming" at Straight. — Tribune Art by Charles

kids growing it on the roof of their house, in their closet, in their dresser drawers, in their basement and in the living room. They tell their parents they're Chinese tomato plants."

Flouting of the law by some local merchants makes it difficult for parents. Marge, wife of a disabled veteran, remarked, disgustedly: "There's a service station about half a mile from Straight I saw selling beer to a 14-year-old girl in the middle of the afternoon. She and a little boy with her were counting out pennies and nickels for two six-packs of beer in broad daylight. This goes on all the time. The kids mix (pills with beer) and share."

Continuing, Joan observed that children take pills from their medicine cabinets at home and mix them with those brought by other kids. "They

she said, adding, "so them into powder marijuana."

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son talk intensely in a rare moment of contact permitted during his early stages "coming" at Straight. — Tribune Art by Charles McShane

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One mother who switched her child from parochial to public school expressed her regrets. "My kids admitted to me (after Straight) when they went to parochial school they didn't do drugs. The minute one of the sisters found a kid doing drugs, she expelled him. Students were watched, their attitudes watched and if one fell asleep in class, the parent was notified."

"But in the (public) school system, it's not like that. The teacher couldn't care less if all the kids sleep in class. The kids sit right in their classroom and roll their joints. The teachers just watch them," she continued.

Pam, a single parent whose job keeps her on the road during much of the day, said she recognized that "peer

pressure" — the same reason she started smoking cigarettes — was the reason her children took to drugs.

"When 85 percent of the kids in your school are doing drugs at one time or another — and my son went as high as cocaine — it's difficult for a kid to withstand that kind of pressure. Most kids can't. Not unless they have been given a fantastic foundation. It takes an inner strength that most kids don't have. Most adults today don't have it. But they're getting it here (at Straight)."

In Pam's case, after her son was suspended from school, a counselor "gingerly" told her about Straight, but added he would deny it if she told anyone that he recommended Straight for her son. He explained: "There already has been a lawsuit (over a child being accused of using drugs). A teacher had

been sued and a parent did win a defamation of character suit." Ironically, six months later the child in question died of a drug overdose, the teacher told Pam.

Even after lengthy exposure to the drug situation through Straight, parents still are shocked at the extensiveness of the drug problem in school. Tim remarked that before coming on the program, he used to wonder how many kids were on drugs. Afterward, knowing what to look for, "I saw maybe five out of 200 students in the school cafeteria at registration that were probably straight. I began to wonder: What's going on? Where is this going to end?"

Drug problems among children have led to the breakups of their parents' marriages. A father accused children of

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