

STRAIGHT TOOK DRUG-ABUSE THERAPY TO THE EDGE

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The youngsters who crossed the threshold of Straight Inc. brought with them drug problems that went far past ordinary, and in turn faced methods of substance abuse treatment that were extraordinary as well.

Severe tactics were the norm at the private drug treatment center, interviews with former clients, their parents and state licensing officials indicate.

The measures included restraining, in which youngsters were held with their arms and legs pulled behind them and their head pushed to the floor; "spit therapy," in which youths were confronted so closely that spit flew in their faces; and drug searches that required new enrollees to squat naked in front of other clients.

The Greenbrier facility voluntarily closed Feb. 11 after a state investigation of complaints filed by parents.

In a society where drug abuse has turned youngsters into convicts, the closing brought to a head the question of how far is too far when dealing with people who have been through every other kind of treatment.

The adolescents that former counselor Curtis ██████ saw come through the center had been through juvenile correction rehabs, the court system, and what ██████ calls "country club" drug treatment programs.

"Thirty days in one of those clinics is like a vacation to them," he said.

Drugs had turned them into chronic liars, runaways, thieves, prostitutes and gang members. "If you go up to one of them and politely say, 'Excuse me, I'd like to help you with your drug problem,' they'd say 'Screw you.'"

██████, 22, was like that himself. He entered a Straight center in Springfield, Va., in 1988, after he faced his third driving-while-intoxicated charge in less than two weeks after finishing a sentence for growing marijuana in North Carolina.

"It took what I went through to get clean," said ██████, who went through 15 months of Straight before becoming a counselor at the Chesapeake center. "For the majority of the kids who were there, it was a last resort."

Dr. Jeremy A. Stowell, medical director of the child and adolescent program at Tidewater Psychiatric Institute, said society is turning out an increasing number of such youngsters.

"It's a very, very malignant development," he said. "Not only are the numbers greater, but the intensity of problems is worse. In my opinion, there will be about 10 percent of drug-dependent adolescents who require longer-term, restrictive, intensive treatment."

Stowell said the line between appropriate methods and unethical ones in such programs can be thin.

"They need rigid, confrontational techniques to break through the denial," Stowell said. "But if it's destructive to the adolescent or the family, I don't believe in it. Nor do I believe there are physical techniques that are appropriate."

State licensing officials say some Straight methods crossed that line. The Straight center, which serves all of Hampton Roads, is a branch of a nationwide treatment network that has long been controversial for its confrontational tactics.

From California to Virginia, from Florida to Ohio, Straight centers have been subject to lawsuits, investigations and withdrawal of licenses. Among the claims against the Florida-based program have been infliction of pain, humiliation, intimidation, ridicule, threat, mental abuse and physical abuse.

"They did things that, if I had done them, I would have been charged with child abuse," said the mother of a Newport News client who left the program after six months.

Her son, who asked that his name not be used, had also reached a stage of desperation when he entered Straight.

He had been through 30-day treatment programs, been put on probation and still continued to move up the scale of serious drugs.

By December 1989, he was taking LSD several times a day. "I didn't think he would make it through the holidays," his mother said.

He consented to entering Straight shortly after Christmas 1989. The day he enrolled he was told to undress, squat and spread his buttocks to be searched for drugs. "I didn't want to do it," he said. "It was embarrassing."

Throughout the next months, he was often restrained, his head pushed to the floor until his ear was bruised for "not going along with the program." He was made to sit for 12-hour sessions in which he was berated and humiliated. He once asked to go to the bathroom and had to wait two more hours before he was allowed to leave the room.

"If you're caught in a lie they stand you up, yell and scream at you," he said. "Spit flies in your face. You can't move. They hold your arms so you can't get away. You have to stand there and take it."

His parents, meanwhile, had their own struggles. They initially were told their insurance would pay for the \$11,000-a-year program. It didn't. In addition, they spent \$500 to \$600 setting up their home to be a "host family" where clients would spend nights. They bought extra beds, an alarm system and locks for cabinets and closets.

Six months later, their son ran away from the program, and they decided to withdraw him from Straight. The family is still trying to pay off a \$9,000 bill, \$6,000 of which was charged for the first month of treatment, his mother said.

Another parent and former client said they believed the rigid treatment was good for some clients, but that Straight accepted many youngsters for whom the program was inappropriate.

For instance, one father said his youngest son was interviewed by staff members while visiting his older son in a Straight center in Springfield.

"Straight talked with the father's ex-wife, who entered the younger boy in the program. "This was a straight-A student," the father said. "He experimented with drugs with his brother, but he hadn't used any for months."

When the father couldn't get Straight to release the boy, he hired a lawyer and gained custody of his son from his ex-wife, but still had to fight Straight to get him out of the facility. When he succeeded with the help of a lawyer, he was told he could no longer visit his older son, "because I was not going along with the program."

His older son, meanwhile, was told his father had abandoned him.

The older son, who later ran away from Straight, said many of the clients there either didn't have serious problems or were kept past the stage when they could have been released.

"They scare kids so bad they'll admit to anything," he said. "It's a mind game. The way they manipulated minds with guilt isn't right."

But parents of current Straight clients say tough tactics are the only thing that stand between their children and prison. All but two of the 58 clients in the Chesapeake center have been transferred to Straight programs in Virginia and other states, said Jacqueline Ennis, an assistant commissioner with the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse.

█████ said most of the clients needed discipline and that as soon as the state started getting involved in toning down the methods, the program began to weaken.

"It saved my life and I saw it going down," said █████, who left the center last May. "If it weren't for Straight I'd be either in prison or dead."

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