

## The Dope on Getting Scared "Straight" - Some say youth drug program's practices border on abuse

San Francisco Chronicle (CA) (Published as THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE) - April 22, 1990

- Author/Byline: JOHN HURST, Los Angeles Times
- Edition: SUNDAY
- Section: SUNDAY PUNCH
- Page: 3

The teenage girl's lips tremble and her eyes brim with tears as she looks at her father across a large, windowless room in a warehouse.

She stands among several dozen adolescents who sit rigidly in rows of blue plastic chairs. Parents sit in similar rows of chairs facing the youngsters. The girl's father is standing. He speaks to his daughter through a microphone.

"I get the feeling you're hopeless," he says in a flat, angry tone. "I love you."

"I love you, Dad."

This is family night at Straight Inc., a Florida-based national drug-treatment program for adolescents that has come to California with the promise of putting parents back in control of their dope-using children. Thousands of desperate parents across the country have turned to the organization, one of the largest live-in drug-treatment programs for adolescents in the nation. Now, after setting up its first California treatment center in Orange County, Straight is eager to expand throughout the state.

But in several other states, including Virginia, Florida, Ohio, Massachusetts and Texas, Straight has been accused of seriously abusing its clients, according to lawsuits, licensing documents, police reports and interviews with the Los Angeles Times. Some former clients complain of being held prisoner by Straight. Others say they were screamed at, spat upon, punched, kicked, tied up, held spread-eagled on the floor and even gagged with feminine hygiene pads as punishment.

Timothy J. Kelleher, assistant vice president of operations for Straight, maintains that complaints of abuse are relatively few, considering, he says, that 35,000 children and parents have been involved in the program since it was founded 14 years ago. Moreover, Straight officials say that many complaints come from disgruntled former clients and parents who lack credibility.

Licensing officials in several states have accused Straight of abusive practices, but with the intense nationwide concern over drugs and the need for treatment, none of the facilities has been shut down by authorities.

In Florida, for example, Straight was put on probation last year because of alleged mistreatment of clients, but a regular operating license was granted later.

Straight's California program, which treats about 60 youngsters, opened in June and is under consideration for a license from the California Department of Social Services.

But some of the organization's methods are against the law in California, according to state officials. For example, Straight's practice of holding minor clients in the program against their will - which is legal in some states - is against the law in California, according to Francine Bremer, an attorney with the state Department of Social Services. And although Straight requires clients to earn private visits with their parents through good behavior, Bremer said juveniles in California have a right to such visits under the law. State officials are also concerned about reports of alleged abuse of clients in other parts of the country.

"We realize they have had problems in the past in other (states)," said Sergio Ramirez, head of the state social services licensing office in Santa Ana. "(But) they ... have indicated they intend to comply with the (state) regulations."

Straight was founded in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1976. It has roots in a controversial rehabilitation program for adolescents called The Seed that flourished in Southern Florida in the early to mid-1970s. Some parents, whose children had been clients in The Seed, helped to found Straight and borrowed some of its techniques, including highly confrontational, all-day mass meetings of clients.

Straight currently treats about 1,000 clients - mostly middle-class youngsters - in nine centers located in seven states. The private, nonprofit organization, which reported an annual income of \$12 million in 1987, is supported for the most part by fees paid by parents and insurance companies, and by donations.

The program uses some conventional treatment techniques such as Alcoholics Anonymous' famous 12 steps toward sobriety. But at the core of the program are the highly confrontational mass "rap" sessions attended by dozens to hundreds of youngsters.

The sessions are held daily for 10 hours or more in large, windowless warehouses where clients - boys on one side of the room and girls on the other - are required to sit straight up in plastic chairs. The proceedings are led by young graduates of the program who work as staff members.

Clients are required to confess in the meetings to drug abuse and related misbehavior. If the confessions are considered genuine, clients get support and encouragement. If not, they are verbally attacked, and if they are uncooperative, they are sometimes grabbed and held on the floor, according to former clients.

"The staff tells the other kids what to do to the clients that don't cooperate," a former client of Straight's Boston-area program in Stoughton told Massachusetts state police last year. "One time, they threw me down on the floor for no reason. They had other kids hold me down. ... I had bruises on my hip bones and ... back."

Straight officials maintain that clients are restrained only by professional staff members and only to protect clients from hurting themselves or others or to prevent them from running away.

Until late last year, Straight clients commonly engaged in a practice called "motivating" in which they wildly waved their arms in the air at group meetings until one of them was chosen to speak. Often the first thing new clients saw was a room full of adolescents with their faces contorted in exertion as they frantically pumped their arms up and down.

"I thought I was in a funny farm," recalled George ██████, 17, about the day in 1988 when he entered Straight's center in Springfield, Va., and saw clients motivating.

If youngsters refused to motivate, according to former clients, others sometimes grabbed their arms and tried to wave them. If they resisted, former clients maintain, they were frequently thrown to the floor and held down.

██████, who left the program last year, said that on numerous occasions he was held and spat upon when he failed to cooperate, and that once his eye was blackened by his own hand when other clients tried to make him motivate.

Joy Margolis, Straight's assistant vice president for resource development, said of such complaints: "It's not the kind of behavior Straight condones, allows or encourages."

Most of Straight's clients are placed in the program by their parents rather than by courts, and youngsters are commonly tricked by parents into visiting Straight centers and not allowed to leave. When clients are first admitted to the program, they are called "newcomers" and are accompanied wherever they go by "oldcomers" who hold them by the back of the pants in a grip called "belt-looping."

"It's a symbol of promoting support (and) responsibility," said Page Peary, vice president of operations for Straight.

But state licensing officials in Florida said the practice has commonly caused "newcomers" to develop constipation to avoid the embarrassment of going to the bathroom in the company of "oldcomers." Straight officials insist that "newcomers" are allowed privacy in bathrooms. Straight clients are required to move through "phases," earning more and more freedom and outside activity - such as the right to go to school - until graduation, which usually takes about a year, program officials say. Their entire day at treatment centers where, except for daily indoor exercise periods - and in some cases, short periods for education - they sit on plastic chairs in group meetings.

Straight officials say that clients are excused from state compulsory education laws with medical leaves for treatment. At night, the youngsters are transported to "host homes," where they write accounts of their behavior and goals before going to bed.

The program is also an all-consuming activity for parents who are required to attend group meetings twice a week and provide their own dwellings as "host homes" for clients. Parents must equip bedroom windows and doors in their homes with alarms to prevent escapes and are expected to provide food and transportation for clients staying with them.

Some advocates for minors contend that the national mood of fear over drugs has enabled programs such as Straight to violate the human rights and dignity of young people under the banner of keeping them off dope. But as proof of the program's effectiveness, Straight officials point to testimonials from parents and graduates of the program.

Former client Jim ██████, 21, praises the program, saying he has been sober for the last five years because of Straight. ██████ who now lives in Newport Beach and is attending college, graduated from Straight's Boston-area center in 1986. He said he began sneaking drinks when he was 7, and by the time he entered Straight at the age of 16, he was using drugs daily. "When I went in, I didn't have any self-esteem," he said. "When I came out of that program, I was able to take care of myself. ... I was able to act instead of react."

Besides such testimonials, Straight boasts of an endorsement by President Bush and a visit to one of its facilities by Nancy Reagan and Diana, princess of Wales. Straight points to its accreditation by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, a private agency. But the joint commission itself has been criticized by patients' advocates for endorsing health facilities that were allegedly substandard.

The Los Angeles Times has received nearly 200 letters from Straight clients, parents and employees extolling the organization. Straight officials acknowledge that the letters were solicited because of concern that a "negative" story about the program might be printed. The mail also included two anonymous letters accusing the program of manipulating parents.

The organization says that about 55 percent of the youngsters who enter Straight graduate and, of those, 70 percent remain drug-free

after two years. Straight's Orange County facility charges about \$14,000 per client per year.

- Caption: PHOTO (2)(1) A girl breaks down and cries during one of Straight's controversial "rap" sessions for adolescent drug addicts, (2) A veteran of the Straight program (below) holds a newcomer in a grip called "belt- looping" / PHOTOS BY LARRY BESSEL/LOS ANGELES TIMES

- *Index terms: RELATED STORY; Straight Inc.; DRUG ABUSE; HOSPITALS; ORGANIZATIONS; YOUTH; ABUSE*
- *Dateline: Yorba Linda, Orange County*
- *Record: 1069337*
- *Copyright: Copyright 1990 San Francisco Chronicle*