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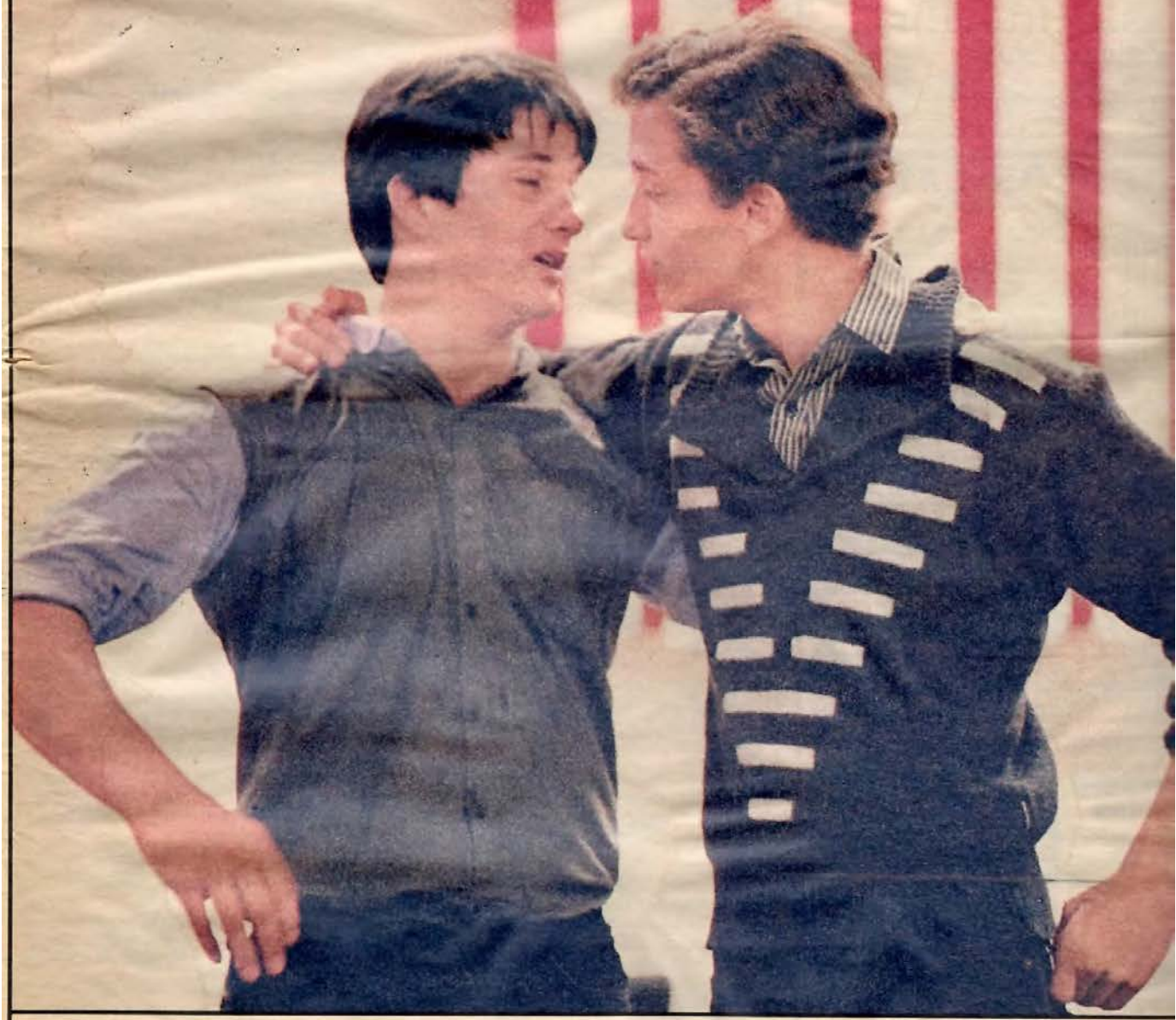
# Detroit



## Straight Inc. gets teens off dru

But could your kid stand the anguish?

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Two new participants in the Straight Inc. program at Mt. Repose, Ohio, are guided to the rest room by another teen who has advanced to a higher level in the treatment hierarchy. Facing page, tears well up in the eyes of Jessica [redacted] as she addresses the group.

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# Inside Straight Inc.

Would you send your kid to live with strangers, and be locked into the bedroom at night?

Would you let your child be treated like a prisoner, under watch even in the bathroom?

Would you do it if it would get your teenager off drugs?

story and photographs by DAVID C. TURNLEY

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Debbie [redacted], 17, started smoking marijuana in the sixth grade. By eighth grade, she was getting high every morning before school. She experimented with LSD, horse tranquilizers, hashish, opium and Valium. "It was more for approval than anything," Debbie says. "To fit in. I thought I was more outgoing with my friends."

She argued with her parents, who didn't like her tight jeans, some of her friends or the hours she spent alone in her room listening to rock music. She skipped school and ran away from home. Trying to control their daughter, David and Roberta [redacted] set down strict rules for her behavior. But they said Debbie ignored them or lied.

They finally took her to a family counselor, but it wasn't until a friend gave David [redacted] a book that he figured out what was going on. As he read it, David [redacted] says, he realized that his stepdaughter's behavior — "pathological lying and habitual running away" — were signs of drug abuse. The [redacted] began to tape-record their daughter's midnight phone calls, looking for evidence.

Last June, while Debbie was on summer break from Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor, her parents sent her to Ohio, where she lived with a family in suburban Cincinnati. For the first two weeks at her new home, she had neither freedom nor privacy; she was followed everywhere she went, even to the bathroom, by another teenager who held onto her belt loops.

She was not allowed to talk unless called on and could not communicate with her family, watch TV or listen to the radio. She could not do anything, even eat, without asking permission.

At night, the drawers and lamps were taken out of her bedroom so she could not use them to escape or hurt herself. The bedroom door was locked from the outside with a deadbolt.

At first, she spent up to 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in group sessions with up to 150 other teenagers in rooms with guards at the doors. Even after she enrolled in a local high school she had to spend four evenings a week, plus one weekend day, at similar meetings.

The sessions were emotional and wrenching; she often cried.

One day after school last December, Debbie ran away. She borrowed some money from a friend and took a bus back to Ann Arbor, where she stayed with some friends. She didn't tell her parents — her mother works at a hospital and her father is an engineer at the University of Michigan — but somehow they found out she was back.

"The day after Christmas, I was walking through Briarwood Mall when my stepdad caught me and handcuffed me. That night, he drove me back down here," she recalls.

David [redacted] took Debbie back to Straight Inc. — an intense, controversial drug program for teenagers near Cincinnati. Debbie is one of 55 Michigan teens in the program.

Straight Inc. opened in 1976 in St. Petersburg, Fla., and now has other centers in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Cincinnati. Its unusual approach to teenage drug use has been featured on ABC's "20/20" show and CBS' "60 Minutes." It has also been the target of lawsuits and controversy.

The program is extremely strict, with military-style regimentation. Teens march in formation and line up with toes touching the heels

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David C. Turnley is a Free Press staff photographer.



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"It was hard for me to physically grab this child — that is not the kind of parent I wanted to be. But it amazes me how strong you have to be with these kids to get help for them."

Debbie [redacted] joins other Straight participants in a song during a group meeting. She entered the program last June, ran away in December and was brought back after Christmas.

David and Roberta [redacted] embrace their daughter during a visit to the foster home where she is living.

The [redacted] read from Debbie's "moral inventory," a daily journal all participants are required to keep.

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of the kid in front. Participants must ask permission to speak, eat, stand up and sit down. Long hair and T-shirts with printing on them are forbidden.

Straight believes that peer pressure gets kids into drugs and that peer pressure can get them off. The program consists mostly of large group sessions, of up to 150 kids, at which teens are called on to confess their drug experiences, their family problems, their private feelings. Often, they break down and cry. Teens who resist or whose confessions don't satisfy the group may be jeered and accused of lying by others in the program.

There is little individual counseling; most of the staffers are teens or young adults who have themselves gone through the program.

Teens' behavior is monitored by the foster parents — whose own children are in the program — with whom they live. After the first several weeks, during which they are totally under the control of others, they can return to school but cannot go anywhere without obtaining permission three days in advance.

Teens stay in the program an average of 11 to 14 months; some have been in two years or longer. How long depends heavily upon the other kids in the program, who must collectively approve requests to advance to the next phase, earning more privileges, and finally to "graduate."

Thought Straight is not associated with any church, there are religious overtones. The program emphasizes traditional, conservative values. Some sessions end with prayer, and the teens are required to keep a "moral inventory," a daily log in which they reflect on their behavior.

"The more you are open to believing in God or a higher power, the better you are able to turn your problems over," says David Crock, assistant director of the Cincinnati center.

Explaining the surveillance and restrictions, he says: "A druggie waits to see what comes up and sort of impulsively runs out and does things. That is not all bad for people in general, but for a druggie, that is all there is to it. We want them to learn to be responsible."

The program costs each Michigan family $4,000, regardless of how long a son or daughter stays in it. (Ohio parents pay $3,000.) Families also pay for food and board. The program is financed by those fees and by private contributions.

About 3,000 teenagers have gone through Straight Inc., which claims that 75 percent of its graduates stay off drugs and alcohol.

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"It is important to take a youngster from a culture that is saturated with the message that using drugs is OK, that anti-authority is OK, promiscuity is OK."

Brian [redacted] from Livonia, is a Straight graduate who joined its staff: "I don't cry much, but I guess I knew I had a problem."

Jerry Rushing, director of the Ohio program and the son of a fundamentalist minister, leads an open meeting on Friday night: "Straight is controversial because we advocate traditional values."

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Many parents are grateful for the program, which they say solved a problem that had driven them to desperation. Some teens say it literally saved their lives. In 1982, Nancy Reagan added her praise when she visited the Straight Inc. center in St. Petersburg, and some of the parents of Michigan teens in the Ohio program are trying to raise money to open a center in the Detroit-Ann Arbor area.

But some participants have charged they were coerced or tricked into joining the program and were abused by other teenagers in it.

In 1982, Fred Collins, a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, sued Straight Inc., claiming he was held for 183 days against his will. Since he was over 18 at the time, a federal jury agreed and awarded him $220,000 in damages. Straight Inc. says it will appeal the ruling.

In news reports at the time, Collins said, "It was really brainwashing. The first thing they try to do is degrade you and take away all sense of personal worth. They take away all of your possessions. They put down all of your friends. They put me down. They would make fun of the way I looked."

Collins said he had to exaggerate his use of drugs. "They didn't care if it was the truth or not. We had to keep on lying until they were satisfied with our stories so we could progress and move on to a higher phase."

Other lawsuits charged that teens were hurt when they were sat on by other participants until they broke down and agreed to conform to Straight's strict rules. Some parents have also questioned the safety of locking children into rooms at night.

Straight Inc. says it has changed some practices as a result of the Collins case and the complaints.

Some professional therapists also question whether Straight's heavy reliance on peer pressure and group sessions, with little trained staff, is the best way to deal with drug problems. Some also question Straight's success rate, which is much higher than that claimed by other drug programs.

Straight Inc. says it is not worried about the controversy. Jerry Rushing, director of the Cincinnati center, says Straight has come under fire because it pioneered drug treatment for teens. Furthermore, he says, "We use peer involvement in a society that is geared toward professional involvement. We use large groups when the norm is small groups . . . And Straight is controversial because we advocate traditional values."

The program is cautious of what kind of publicity it gets. But it recently allowed a Free Press photographer to spend three days at the Cincinnati center, talking to parents and kids.

Straight Inc. is located in a large, one-story, aluminum-sided building, hidden behind a propane gas

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When the graduation of a Dearborn Heights youth is announced, his stepfather tells him: "You are a tough, hard-nosed, well-groomed man, and that is what Straight turns out."

Debbie [redacted] and others in Straight seek to be called on by "motivating" (above), flapping their arms, heads and bodies. Twice-a-week meetings (left) include families, who sit facing the youths.

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company in Mt. Repose, northeast of Cincinnati. The building has few windows and no signs to identify it. Most of the teenagers are inside the door before they know where they have been taken.

Paul [redacted] 17, from Livonia, remembers how he got there in January.

"My father woke me up at 3 o'clock in the morning and said he was taking me down to an Ohio college that we had talked about previously."

Once inside, Paul realized what was going on and tried to run, but Alfred [redacted] had blocked the door. The next thing he knew, Paul was signing a paper which "voluntarily" admitted him to the program.

Director Rushing, 36, the son of a fundamentalist minister, was an administrator and counselor in an Atlanta psychiatric hospital before joining Straight. He says Straight believes that "druggies" — that's what Straight Inc. calls its charges — must be completely removed from their past environment so they can be retaught "traditional societal values."

"It is important to take a youngster (away) from a culture that is saturated with the message that using drugs is OK, that anti-authority is OK, promiscuity is OK; the culture that sabotages the youngsters' values — self-discipline, wholesomeness," Rushing says.

The large auditorium, with a huge American flag on one wall, is filled with teens about to start an afternoon "group rap." The teens are sitting erect in plastic chairs facing the two staff leaders sitting on high chairs. Boys sit on one side of the room, girls on the other. They are not allowed to mingle.

Brian [redacted] 21, one of 10 junior staff members, is leading the session.

Brian, whose family lives in Livonia, is a strong, handsome, articulate young man with a tattoo on one arm, a remnant from his days as an Army MP. He might be the epitome of what many Straight parents would like their sons to be when they finish the program.

David Kennedy had died the previous day, and Brian is drawing on that episode and his own life as he speaks about the false glamor that drugs promise.

Brian recounts how he sold drugs to unemployed workers standing in line at a Michigan Employment Security Commission office where he worked as a security guard after leaving the Army, and how he attracted girlfriends because he could get them the best "stuff."

He also tells about the dealer who sold him pounds of marijuana and offered to buy him cocaine if Brian would bring drugs



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Sharon Gregorowicz (above) speaks to her 16-year-old son, Jeff [redacted] (below), in front of a group meeting. Another son, also enrolled at Straight, had run away earlier that day. Jeff breaks into tears, he says, because he is worried about his brother's fate.

into Detroit from Canada across the Ambassador Bridge. Brian says he liked the feeling of importance that gave him.

Eventually, Brian says after the meeting, his lifestyle caused strains between him and his family. One day, his mother said she could not stand it anymore; either she or Brian would have to go. Brian left home during the summer of 1982.

He lived in his car for a while, continuing to sell drugs. He was eventually picked up by the police, who took him back to his parents. They told the police they would take him back only if he would admit himself to Straight. He arrived at the Ohio center on Sept. 11, 1982.

"I was angry when I got here," Brian recalls. "I told the staff I would kick their ass . . . I came in in the early morning and did not join the group until dinner time. One woman . . . said I did have problems with my family but it was because of the drugs. I did not cry until then. I don't cry much, but I guess I knew I had a problem. They said I could try

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PHOTO RETOUCHED TO CONCEAL IDENTITIES

Participants must line up, feet touching, before receiving permission to leave the center for the night.

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it for 14 days and quit if I did not like it."

Brian finished the program in 10 months and joined the staff immediately afterward.

Around him, teens are frantically but quietly flapping their arms, begging to be called on to "relate" to what someone else is saying.

Brian explains why they're doing it: "When I first came into Straight, they sat me down in the first row and I thought I was in some kind of insane asylum. It's called 'motivating.' Who wants to talk the most? It helps them to get a more positive mindset towards things."

One after another, the kids are called on to stand up and talk. They talk about their pasts, their involvement with drugs, relationships with friends and families, the struggles they're going through and things they see in themselves that they like.

Whether they want to or not, members must open up and share their feelings. If they don't, others cry out, "I'm tired of your crap. When are you going to stop pretending you have everything under control and get honest?"

At the end of every testimonial, the group yells in unison, "Love you."

Paul [redacted] stands up. He had gotten to Phase Three — meaning he was back in school — but was temporarily sent back to the beginning for an infraction — listening to rock music. He lost the freedoms he had won, and is again being followed everywhere by another member, who holds onto his pants.

"Paul was not being open with the group and he was testing his morals with music," Brian explains after the meeting. "Paul would not come to the group for help. He wanted to seem like he had everything under control and was perfect. He put in for fourth phase but was not making it. He was listening to music he was not comfortable with. He felt that way, and after being confronted by the group he admitted it. We do not look at it as a punishment, but as a learning experience."

Ken [redacted] 19, from Whitmore Lake near Ann Arbor, says he started using drugs when he was 15, but says he was a "dry druggie" for a long time before then. He says he needed "clothes, sex and music to feel good rather than just feeling good about myself." Drugs were his last resort.

Ken blames part of his problem on rock music. "Rock and roll was so important to my image when I was a druggie . . . I was feeling good off of hard rock, but it was really closing me off from my parents. I used to listen to WMJC and to CKLW, but I cannot now because it puts me through feelings of weakness. Detroit is full of druggie stations — they promote drugs all of the way."

For many of the teens, drugs had been a way of coping with common adolescent struggles — insecurity, the need for ap-

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proval and acceptance and family problems.

At a group meeting that night, Debbie [redacted] breaks down in tears as she talks about her family. Her parents were divorced when she was a year old. Her mother remarried when Debbie was four.

"I remember I felt really bad towards my stepfather — that he had taken my father away from me. I remember I even planned in my head that I was going to kill him. I remember telling my friends how twisted my mind was."

Parents join their children for similar sessions every Monday and Friday night. Straight believes the entire family is affected by a drug-using member and requires all

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Above: Nina [redacted] hugs her foster son, Doug [redacted] 17, from Ann Arbor, on an emotional night. Her 17-year-old son Bill, left, was graduating from Straight that evening. Right: David and Gretchen [redacted] of Ann Arbor stand before the group with their daughter, Karla, who graduated after 21 months.

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family members to participate in the program.

Says Crock, "A druggie family is a sick family and if that family is to get well, everyone must make changes."

The teenagers are sitting upright in their chairs shouting out "I Am Straight" to the tune of "I Am Woman." Their parents, brothers and sisters sit facing them.

Newcomers stand and introduce themselves. They give their names, ages and the drugs they used. They tell about shame, guilt and painful experiences in their past, and some goals they've set for the future.

Some try to get the ordeal over with as quickly as they can. Most break down and cry.

Between introductions, "oldcomers" — teenagers who have been in the program the longest — talk about their struggles and changes.

Then parents get up to tell about their unhappy life with a "druggie" son or daughter. Most describe a situation they could no longer handle and relief that their child is, for now, in someone else's hands.

Ken's parents, Sue and Dale [redacted], stand up.

"We've been in the program 1½ years," Sue says. "When I think back two years and when I think of all the anguish I went through . . . I always wanted a happy family, and the love was probably there. My son had a lot of curiosity. He went to a psychiatrist for about five months (until) we realized it

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"A druggie family is a sick family, and if that family is to get well everyone must make changes."

wasn't doing anything. I knew he was not fulfilled by anything he did. He did well in track, for example — he won his first race and then did not have any interest in it anymore."

She recalls a family trip: "On the way home from Canada, we got in an argument and Ken got belligerent. I turned to my husband and said if he feels that way, let him walk home. We were 400 miles from home. As we started to leave him, we put

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Debbie [redacted] practices the violin at her foster parents' home in suburban Cincinnati. She recently resumed playing after a lapse of three years.

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on the brakes and I wondered if we should really do this. We looked in the rear-view mirror and saw Ken flipping us the bird and I knew then that we should keep going."

The [redacted] learned about the program from a TV show.

"The TV program said it is strong, tough and hard on everyone," says Mrs. [redacted] "But it is worth it. I found when I came here we gave Ken to a higher power and it was a load off these shoulders. I feel good about myself now, and when we came into this program I did not."

As the microphone is passed, some parents tell their children they are disappointed. They say they can see on their children's faces that the kids are still lying, conning their way through the program. The parents declare they will never accept their sons or daughters back into the family unless they see a change.

The children stand silently as their parents speak; the teens respond only at the end, "Love you, Mom" or "Love you, Dad," and then sit down.

Rushing announces those who have graduated. Rick [redacted] of Dearborn Heights is one who has made it. His stepfather, Lee Kaminski, tells him: "You are a tough, hard-nosed, well-groomed man, and that is what Straight turns out."

At the end of the meeting, the two groups join arms and recite the Lord's Prayer.

Nancy and Frank Laurette have driven down from their home in Plymouth. Their two oldest sons, 14 and 17, are in the program, and they have come to talk to the staff about admitting their third son, 13.

The Laurettes, both Livonia public school teachers, say their oldest boy was getting drunk two to three times a week and smoking pot two to three times a day, and the 14-year-old was smoking pot every morning before school. Their youngest son has not used drugs, but they are worried about his behavior.

Standing in the lobby after the meeting, Frank Laurette explains that the boy is showing "a lot of resistance, manipulation and withholding of feelings. He is not taking responsibility for things. It's taking a lot of confronting to point things out to him. Sometimes the siblings at home are just as sick as the siblings on drugs. There are some children in the program who are not on drugs but that have needed help."

Asked for an example of their son's behavior, Frank Laurette said, "He'd be on his paper route and we'd want him home for dinner and he'd still be out collecting — because being home for dinner was not important. So we had him quit his route. He won't work for anything on a longtime basis — it's always situational, and that's a druggie behavior."

If Straight will accept their youngest son, he says, "We'd go home and get him and bring him in here. If we brought him down here, he would cry all of the way down and show anger, but he knows he could not avoid it because he knows he is dependent on us."

Professionals in drug rehabilitation are cautious about taking a clear stand for or against Straight Inc.



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Bennet Wolper, a family therapist in Ann Arbor, says Straight presents itself as a panacea for teenage drug problems, and cautions that parents should not necessarily see it that way.

Wolper says there is a difference between substance abusers — who carelessly use drugs or alcohol — and those who are chemically dependent, who cannot cope without drugs or booze. He says that Straight is not necessarily right for both, but that the program does not distinguish between them.

"The massive type of intervention that Straight uses may be effective for hard-core drug or alcohol users, but equally as destructive to many who do not fit that description, who may be in early stages of abuse, suffering from mental health problems, schizophrenia, or whose real problems stem from relationships in their families that have been present long before they ever started using drugs, regardless of the extent."

Wolper worries that Straight might attract some parents who are simply unhappy with a rebellious teen's behavior, regardless of how much, or even whether, the child uses drugs.

Blair Miller, director of the Farmington Hills Advisory Council, a local drug rehabilitation program, argues that in Straight's large group therapy sessions, individual problems may not get the attention they need. It is too easy for "pieces to get lost," he says. He says the effect of the emotional group sessions "is not long-lasting."

George Beschner, who is in charge of program evaluation for the National Institute on Drug Abuse, says much of the controversy would be cleared up if Straight would subject itself to evaluation by an unbiased professional organization. The program has been reviewed, he says, but only by organizations hired by Straight.

After the Friday night meeting, David and Roberta [redacted] are at their daughter's foster home. Debbie is playing the violin in the dining room. It is only the third time she has played since she quit three years ago.

Her foster parents are in the living room looking a little like strangers in their own home. Their daughter, who was admitted to Straight a week ago, is living in another foster home and their two other "druggie" foster children are sitting on the couch writing their moral inventories.

When Debbie finishes rehearsing, her parents surround her with hugs. David [redacted] says, "I never thought I would see this day."

Says Roberta [redacted] "It's unfortunate that there has been all this controversy about the program and about the kids being restrained or mistreated, because they (Straight Inc.) are so respected."

Adds her husband: "It was hard for me to physically grab this child — that is not the kind of parent I wanted to be. But it amazes me how strong you have to be with these kids to get help for them . . .

"The road is not going to be easy from here on out with Debbie, but we have the tools, and if we apply them we'll be successful, hopefully. You start a family thinking everyone will be happy — your kids having self-esteem — and just the opposite happens. This is the only way we have found to deal with it." ■

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