Special Salute to PROCTER & GAMBLE

Is Straight a Druggie's Last Chance?
Al Porkolab and the Secret of Bogart's

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MISSING

Adoptees search for pieces of their past

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ON THE COVER: *Hand-tinted photo by D. Altman Fleischer. Special thanks to Bob Butz and Wayne Dunn for creating the puzzle.*

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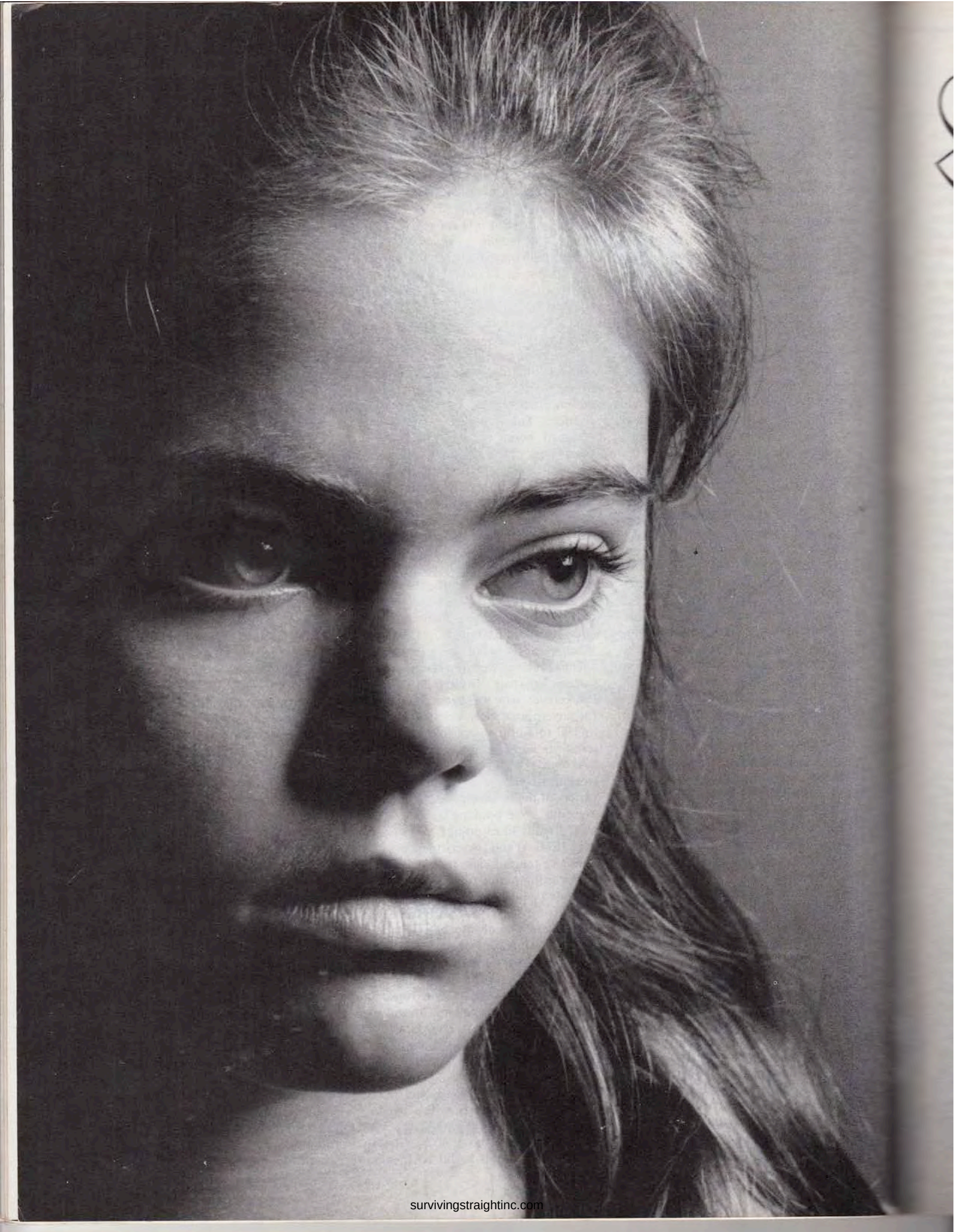

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STRAIGHT: Does It Work?

By Mary McCarty and Rick Bird

Photos by D. Altman Fleischer

A father walks up to the microphone, his voice shaking with anger and pain. "One thing I want you to learn is to feel shame," he tells his son. The son and an audience of some 200 others at Straight, Inc.—one of the most publicized and controversial adolescent drug rehabilitation programs in the country—listen stoically. "You've lied to me, you've stolen from me. I don't know how you can do that to people who are helping you. May God forgive you—I don't know anyone else who can. The hardest thing I have to say tonight is that I love you."

This intense confrontation is vintage Straight. The Friday night open meeting, when parents and family publicly confront children with their emotions, is the therapeutic equivalent of riding the Vortex at Kings Island. You don't know where

Rick Bird *is news reporter for WEBN.*

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Tom Aulicino once stole from his parents to support his drug habit. Now he considers them his best friends. "Straight worked for me because it was more intense in the sense of talking about past feelings and getting out my feelings," Aulicino says.

Michael [redacted], 21, is in fifth phase at Straight and a trainee for the paraprofessional staff. His intake photograph showed a gaunt young man who could barely open his eyes. "This place helped me save my life," he says.

your emotions will be hurled next. Outbursts of anger and pain are juxtaposed with declarations of love. Each conversation is parenthesized by a sometimes comically long chorus of "Love ya, Mom. Love ya, Dad. Love ya, Sally. Love ya, Bob. Love ya, Eric. Love ya, Bobbie," as family members greet each other in the traditional Straight way, sounding like the Waltons on a particularly zealous night.

Some parents are in suspense about whether or not their child has earned the privilege of a five-minute, supervised talk with them after the meeting. Some parents rejoice as their child flings open his arms, runs to embrace them and yells, "Coming home!" This is a Straight ritual announcing the end of the first, most restrictive phase of the program; the child is allowed to leave his host home and to return to his family.

Therapy groups aren't the only places where Straight arouses intensely divided emotions. Among former clients and mental health and legal professionals, Straight elicits passionate differences of opinion. "This place helped me save my life," says Michael [redacted], 21, who is in the fifth, or final, phase of his program and a trainee for Straight's paraprofessional staff. His fresh-faced good looks bear no resemblance to the emaciated, vacant-eyed young man in the snapshot taken when he entered Straight a year ago. "I have friends who are dead from auto accidents or suicide, or practically vegetables. I'm going to help as many people as I can. I don't see how people can think that trying to save kids' lives can be such a bad thing."

Other families feel emotionally scarred by their experiences at Straight. Rosemary and Robert Weaver of Loveland say that their 16-year-old son, Eric, was diagnosed at St. Elizabeth Medical Center as having a major depressive illness when he came out of Straight. "When we pulled him from the program, I was stunned when they brought him out," says Rosemary, who has blondish-brown, shoulder-length hair, blue eyes, and a straightforward, expressive face with little makeup. "They were on both sides of Eric, guiding him out the door. He was looking past us. My only way of expressing it is that he was in a trance, with a very vacant look. Eric said in a very slow, measured voice, 'Are you sure I can leave?' "

Eric, who has fluffy, very blond hair and bright blue eyes, speaks softly, shyly. "Each day I feel better, although that isn't much," he says. "I'll withdraw various times. I daydream about Straight, and try to change things in my memory. As soon as you're free, you realize, 'My God, what have they been doing to me?' It's like my whole brain shut down and didn't start working until I came back out. There were so many times I've been restrained and assaulted, so many ways I've been abused." Robert says that, before entering Straight, Eric was an active high school athlete. Now he is much more passive and reserved.

The Weavers have filed a $1 million lawsuit against Straight, Inc., asking for compensatory damages for Eric's participation in Straight from March 12 to June 13, 1985. The suit alleges that Eric Weaver "was on numerous occasions subjected to physical beatings and painful physical restraint" authorized by the Straight staff, and that Straight misrepresented the qualifications of its staff.

Wherever Straight goes—currently there are programs in Tampa Bay; Orlando; Atlanta; Springfield, Virginia; Stoughton, Massachusetts; Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Dallas—controversy follows. You can find the same testimonials of saved lives. You're likely to find lawsuits alleging physical and mental abuse, and ill-defined suspicions about cults and brainwashing. Straight has even been bestowed the official Seal of Controversy, a *60 Minutes* expose.

Recurring questions haunt Straight: is the program run by a professional staff, or is it kids supervising kids, potentially descendants of *Lord of the Flies*? Does the program's structure make the danger of physical abuse of clients particularly strong? Do adolescents have civil liberties that should not be violated, however noble the intent?

Interestingly, this essential question has remained unchanged since Straight's genesis with the Seed program, which had branches in Ft. Lauderdale and Cleveland. When The Seed, Inc. left Cleveland in November 1978—after operating without a license for three years—the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* quoted an Ohio Youth Commission official as saying, "You get the feeling the kids are being brainwashed. Still, if I had to pick between being brainwashed by Seed or being brainwashed by drugs, I'd pick Seed."

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William Glick, director of the Cincinnati branch of Straight, Inc., scoffs at the notion that anyone is being brainwashed by his organization. "What the kids are experiencing is a change in perspective. People are saying things about the program that aren't happening," says Glick, a slight, intellectual-looking man with curly black hair receding slightly from his forehead. He has an intense, appraising gaze and angular features. "If you want to see real brainwashing in the community—a kid can turn on fourteen beer commercials. That's where brainwashing is." [redacted] adds, "Straight didn't brainwash me. If anything, they debrainwashed me. I carried a little matchbook with me always that said, 'Drugs are my life.' The way I lived, I had a big drug-dealer fantasy, like Scarface. I had to learn a new way of living. I had gone down as far as I could go."

Some dismiss the complaints as the grumbling by people who didn't have the fortitude to complete the program. "When I ran away from the program, when I copped out, I wanted to blame Straight, to say that Straight held me against my will," says Richard Mullinax, a 22-year-old graduate of the Washington area program who recently joined Straight's professional staff.

The Straight building in Mt. Repose (near Milford) in Clermont County looks like one of those faceless public school buildings built in the '60s—brick, flat, windowless, cream-colored. In the lobby are photographs of Nancy Reagan's visit to the Cincinnati Straight, and a framed thank-you letter signed by Mrs. Reagan. In Glick's office is a blown-up photograph of Nancy Reagan and Princess Diana at the Washington office, simply and reverently titled "The Visit."

Straight won't divulge the amount of the non-refundable admission fee, but sources say the best current estimate is $5,000. Daily rates are $19 for local residents and $25 for out-of-towners. Glick says no applicants are turned away for financial reasons. Therefore, although concerned about the sparse number of minority clients, he says that ability to pay is not a factor.

Inside the building, teens "motivate" and lead newcomers around by the belt loop. Motivating occurs during group rap sessions. In order to be recognized to speak, clients must jerk their bodies and flail their arms wildly. The theory is that clients are breaking out of the passivity that characterized their "druggie past" (a constant buzzword in the Straight lexicon).

Whenever a first-phase client leaves the group, he must be accompanied by a client in a higher level, who grabs him firmly by the belt loop. Straight staffers say this gives the first-phasers a sense of security, of knowing that someone is always there to help them. Straight clients and graduates—even admiring ones—perceive it as a means to assert control over the first-phase clients and keep them from fleeing.

For some, the belt-loop restraint is symbolic of everything they liked least about Straight. Molly [redacted] now 18, entered Straight in May 1982. To this day, she jumps if anyone touches her belt loop. "It would always make your underwear yank up," she says with a somewhat embarrassed laugh. "No way could you get away if someone has got a hold of your pants, and they say it was 'because we care about you,' " says Mike [redacted], 24, who graduated from the Straight program five years ago.

The Straight program is based on what its directors call "positive peer culture," and an adaptation of Alcoholics Anonymous Steps for Personal Change (e.g., "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol and drugs—that our lives had become unmanageable.").

"One of the distinct advantages of our program is that the young people hold each other accountable," Glick says. "They'll say, 'I saw you talking with your druggie friends, and I don't think that's in your best interest.' " Adolescents also are more skilled in detecting any dissembling on the part of their peers, Glick says. "Chemically dependent kids are very resourceful. They really know how to con the outside world. In our program there's a saying—'You can't con a con.' "

The program is structured around five phases of treatment, which gradually advance the client to greater autonomy and responsibility. During the first phase—a minimum of fourteen days, but typically much longer—clients live with a "host" family, which includes a client in an advanced stage of the program, known as the "Oldcomer." The "Newcomer" stays in the building roughly twelve hours a day Monday through Saturday, and seven hours on Sunday. Television, telephone, radio and reading anything other than the Bible or another religious text are prohibited, because the client is supposed to be working toward self-awareness of his chemical dependency. "There's no lounge in the building, no ping-pong or pool tables," Glick says. "We're dealing with a serious and life-threatening disease, and we have to socially detoxify them. They respond well to the structure."

Although at home during second phase, the client still will be spending the bulk of his time—roughly twelve hours daily, and seven on Sunday—at Straight.

During third phase, the teens go back to school or work, coming directly to Straight afterward. Visitors at home are still monitored, and so are conversations at school. They are expected to say, "It's not in my best interest to talk to you," if approached by one of their old friends.

Breaching that law can mean being hazed by the group or even being sent back to a lower phase, according to the accounts of many former clients. Some say that the policy enhances the adolescents' sense of security as they face the brave new world of going to school drug-free. "The rule gives them something they can hold onto," says Dr. Edward Fisher, a consulting psychiatrist for Straight, who has a private practice in Clermont County. "The rule gives them an out that doesn't make them feel like they're the ones who are rejecting their old friend."

Davia [redacted]—now 19 and a Xavier University student—left Straight when she turned 18, although nearly finished with her program. She says that Straight's demands were so distracting that she couldn't concentrate on her school work when she returned to Walnut Hills High School. She resented telling old friends that they were "not in her best interest." "They said, 'What? What does that mean?' They didn't understand. Straight has all these cliches that people outside of Straight can't understand. If you don't feel it in your heart, you say it like a clone, and naturally people think, 'Oh, she's been brainwashed.' You weren't allowed to talk to people if you had been to a party with them and had a couple of beers.

"My friends were really hurt that I wouldn't talk to them. The rules apply to everyone, despite the fact that a 20-year-old doesn't need the same rules

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Richard Mullinax was living on the streets of Washington, D.C., when he entered Straight again after a couple of unsuccessful experiences. "I was doing pot three or four times a day and doing cocaine. I came crawling back on my hands and knees."

Lisa [redacted] 20, a fifth-phaser at Straight, entered Straight at 17. "I had a tough-guy attitude, and I brought it with me," she says. She left Straight three times during her program, but now she is determined to graduate—and to stay off drugs for good.

as a 14-year-old. People would call me and say, 'We saw you talking to someone who wasn't in your best interest.' It was a big, complicated mess. I felt like I couldn't do anything right." After three weeks back at Walnut Hills, Davia got sent back for talking with some of her old friends. She ultimately missed three quarters of her junior year.

Some recent lawsuits against Straight have charged that the drug rehabilitation program may violate Ohio's compulsory school laws. The law provides that principals may excuse students for a "bodily or mental condition" (Ohio Revised Code 3321:04). The law also stipulates that "provision must be made for appropriate instruction." Straight's Dr. Fisher concedes that these kids are out of school for too long. "It's a matter of dollars. Straight is hardly paid by any insurance companies. I could list 100 things that Straight ought to have." The hospital care units may not get a much better grade card on education. One care-unit director says that they do provide educational tutors, but calls it "a token."

Chemical dependency is a life-threatening illness, Glick contends, that warrants absence from school. "Our view is that this is a disease, no different from leukemia, polio or any other chronic, potentially fatal disease. And because the disease has many social aspects, we want it controlled before they return to school. For most of the time before entering Straight, the kids did not do well in school, treated school as a throwaway right. When our kids return, they know why they're there. Most of the kids return to the level of achievement prior to drug use, and many do better because of the structure and internal self-discipline gained from the program."

Initially, Principal Dave Shepherd at Walnut Hills High School worried about the long "time out" from school. Extensive experience with Straight has allayed his fears, he says. "For some it was the only way to get back on track. There's no instruction because of total isolation from the familiar. There's a retraining in values. I have been very impressed with the low recidivism." As an educator, is he bothered by the ban on reading? "They come back with a thirst and hunger for knowledge, re-dedicated," Shepherd says.

Straight is one of several drug rehabilitation programs that make presentations at Walnut Hills. School officials are cautious about selling any program, preferring to offer parents a number of treatment options. Shepherd says that he has not experienced problems with any of the drug treatment programs. "My feeling from talking to kids who have gone through Straight is that they have not been subjected to physical restraint or abuse."

Physical restraint is the hottest issue surrounding Straight, fueled by lawsuits like the Weavers' and another—containing allegations of particularly brutal physical abuse—by Wendi [redacted] and her parents, Michael and Joann [redacted] Most of the accounts of unwarranted restraints and physical abuse go back several years, although some, like the Weavers' story, are more recent. [redacted] attorneys declined comment, but the affidavits filed in the Clermont County Court of Common Pleas in 1984 allege that she was subjected to continual abuse. [redacted] who now lives in Illinois, was enrolled by her parents in Straight on April 18, 1983, according to the affidavit, and was assured that no physical force was used in the program. Straight clients, host families and employees repeatedly battered [redacted] the suit claims—grabbing her, striking her in the face, sitting on her, scratching her, pinching her, picking her up by her hair, jumping on her and calling her obscene names. Her pleas to go to a hospital or to see a social worker were denied, the suit says. Finally, on August 2, according to the affidavit, "Wendi [redacted] who was sick, dazed, stiff, sore and covered with abrasions and bruises from previous beatings and abuse, was dragged out of bed and up some stairs and laid on the bathroom floor by Laura and Deborah [redacted] [Straight clients], who kicked her about the head and body and stepped on her stomach. Laura [redacted] then repeatedly struck Wendi about the body with a foreign object, and kicked Wendi in the side of the face. Wendi was bleeding from the mouth, her teeth had been damaged, and she had been temporarily knocked unconscious." [redacted] spent most of that day and the next in the Straight's intake room before being taken to Clermont County Mercy Hospital, the suit claims.

The defendants' answer, filed with the court, says that [redacted] was violent and moody and often tried to bite people, and that they did what was

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necessary to restrain her. A statement from Deborah [redacted] in the file states that she remembers telling Straight that [redacted] should not be in the program because no one knew how to deal with her.

Glick is bound by state and federal confidentiality laws not to discuss specific charges, he says. "What they allege didn't happen," he says simply. "Imagine a scenario where a chemically dependent kid tells his parents part of the truth. The kid might tell the parents that he went to get some milk, but the kid's not telling that he met someone at the store and went over to his house to do drugs. There's a tremendous difference between truth and dishonesty. Kids using drugs—what kind of conception of right and wrong and truth do those kids have?"

That's a typical Straight dodge when anyone challenges or criticizes the program, Robert Weaver says—who can believe these kids, these druggies? The parents receive a more sophisticated but no less peremptory response, Weaver says. "Yes, I'm in denial," he says. "Everyone tells me I'm a damned idiot. They call everything that disagrees with them denial, or a druggie attitude."

Eric describes several instances of restraint and physical abuse. One culminated in his being confined in Straight's intake room for more than three weeks, he says. His parents became alarmed when they saw that he was carving on his arms. This phenomenon apparently is not uncommon in drug rehabilitation programs; kids use their nails or a piece of metal to carve messages or designs. "Carving on the arms, rubbing the skin raw, is a form of rebellion; you get attention from it," says Christy [redacted] 15, of Fairfield Township, who spent seventeen months in the program. "They can control everything, control you from talking and singing, but they can't control you from carving on your arms. I saw guys who had carved up their whole arms, who would hold up their arms and watch the blood drip."

When asked, "What is on your arms?" Eric answered, "Feelings." His father recalls, "He said that he had deep feelings that he couldn't get out. Self-mutilation appears to be prevalent. I attribute it to a deep sense of loss."

The Weavers' request to speak to an executive staff person about the self-mutilation was denied, they say. One staff member told them that it was a step in the process. No one prevented him from carving on his arms, Eric says. "I'd just dig away. Some kids said, 'Those aren't deep enough. I'll get you a knife.' "

The word among Straight graduates from several years ago is that unnecessary physical restraint has been greatly reduced, perhaps eliminated. "I think they have stopped sitting on people," Mike [redacted] says. "They wouldn't restrain people who didn't need it," Davia [redacted] says, "but I think they intimidated people into blowing up by yelling at them, 'You did this in the past; you're a big baby.' "

Christy, who left Straight slightly more than a year ago, says, "Restraining was done every day, and done when it wasn't needed, when you were supposed to sit up straight."

During a February 1986 site inspection of the Cincinnati Straight program, members of the Ohio Bureau of Drug Abuse (BuDA) investigative team reported witnessing four incidents of unnecessary physical restraint during one twenty-minute period. During a followup inspection on August 18, 1986, BuDA investigators concluded that Straight had adopted a new policy on participant restraints. Four staff members and two clients testified that clients are no longer routinely held in restraints.

A BuDA official says that Straight tried to receive certification for three years until finally obtaining it last August. The agency generally doesn't receive complaints about drug rehabilitation programs, but it has a thick file on Straight, the BuDA representative says. "Most programs don't have any problems meeting our standards," he says. BuDA is operating under standards that are ten years old, he adds, and do not address the unique residential situation of Straight's host homes. Further complicating the situation is the fact that a separate agency, the Ohio Department of Human Services, is responsible for licensing foster homes. Since no other agency can have jurisdiction over drug rehabilitation programs, no one currently oversees the host homes, the BuDA official says.

Jim Wasserman, executive director of the Clermont County Mental Health Board, says, "We do not have a professional relationship with Straight, but from our knowledge of its policies and procedures, it would not meet the requirements for contract services."

Dr. Richard Heyman, the part-time medical director for Straight, says that in two and a-half years he has only treated one client who was injured while being restrained. That client suffered an abrasion on the kneecap. "If kids are being hurt, it's more likely to be the restrainer. I've treated some who have been punched and kicked," Heyman says. Only professional staff practice restraint now, and only when it's essential, Glick says.

Straight is proud of its emphasis on family involvement. "When the family comes to Straight, the whole family is considered the client," says staff member Bill [redacted]. "The overwhelming spirit is that, 'I feel free to talk about my family. I feel safe and secure that you're not going to talk to your neighbors.' Before coming here, many parents feel they're the only ones. All the guilt and shame the parents have felt starts to lift."

Tom Aulicino once stole from his parents to support his drug habit and got into a brawl with his stepfather over the issue of Tom's girlfriend's residence in his parents' house. "The program teaches you basically honesty, not judging people, loving your parents—a lot of things that if you go to high school they think it's sissy," says Aulicino, a tan, muscular young man training to be a police officer, and looking nothing like a sissy. Today he can talk openly with his parents, tell them he loves them. Their marriage, once threatened by his drug abuse, is strong again. "They're best friends again."

The program that rejuvenates some families tears others apart. Families like the Weavers and Shelly and Rick [redacted] and their daughter, Christy [redacted] speak of their experiences with Straight like weary war veterans. Christy, whose parents divorced when she was an infant, was 12 when she decided to live with her father. When she ran away from her new home, her father and stepmother decided to put her into Straight. "Straight told them that if I didn't come in I would die within a year, that I had druggie attitudes," Christy says. "The basic concept of Straight is that if you leave Straight, you're going to die. When people turn 18 and leave, they say, 'I'll be reading the newspaper and you'll be dead. You'll never be worth

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Questioning the Cure

"There is no hurt, like the hurt a child can give a parent."

—Nancy Reagan

It was September 1985. Nancy Reagan was speaking at the end of an emotionally draining session at the Straight drug abuse center in Mt. Repose.

Over the course of the evening, the teens in the program had recited a street-drug litany of substance abuse. "I did alcohol, pot, speed, acid, coke," they chanted one by one. They "motivated" and shouted and even screamed their love for their parents.

Nancy watched, wept and hugged.

Indeed, there was a lot of hurt in this room, but I wondered, was it really being healed?

This was my first up-close look at Straight in action. Since 1983, I had heard some startling stories about mental and physical abuse at the program.

Teens who would contact the WEBN news department were often confused and angry. Many felt betrayed by parents. Some had a drug problem. Others did not. They wanted someone to hear their story because, in their minds, the station was a young person's friend.

It would become a frustrating experience for me, trying to report on such issues as parent-child relations, conflicting philosophies concerning drug use and abuse, and even the politics of drug rehabilitation.

While I listened to several Straight "horror stories," few people would go on the record. Some teens were afraid of parental reprisals. Others, about to turn 18, just wanted to go to college and get on with their lives. One had contacted an attorney, who didn't want the story aired to the media.

But I had heard enough to suggest, in some cases, that Straight's "cure" might be worse than the disease.

There were many tales that have since been raised in recent lawsuits. Physical abuses that included "sitting on" to restrain misbehavior by others in the program. Isolation from family, friends and school. And personal stories that made one wonder what was going on in Mt. Repose.

—An 18-year-old girl told me she had been placed in Straight by her parents and was being held against her will. She was released by Straight officials when her boyfriend showed up with the Clermont County Sheriff.

—A 17-year-old in the Straight program for four weeks claimed she was sexually molested while staying at one of the Straight "family homes."

—A 22-year-old called for information about Straight after he was forbidden to see his brother who was in Straight for six months. Staffers said he was not allowed to visit because he was one of his brother's "druggie friends."

—A father who was a Straight supporter called after hearing news reports about the Weaver lawsuit. [Rosemary and Robert Weaver of Loveland have filed a $1 million lawsuit against Straight, Inc. The suit alleges that their son, Eric, was subjected to physical beatings and painful physical restraints.] He said he was not bothered by accounts of physical abuse at Straight. As he put it, "Someone needs to whip my son into shape."

I realized the only fair way to deal with these charges was to invite Straight staffers on WEBN's regular Sunday night talk show. When I made the offer to then Straight director Jerry Rushing, he replied, "We feel WEBN fosters the drug problem by playing rock music, and we don't want anything to do with the station."

Indeed, Rushing and Straight's dislike for rock music is imposed on teens who enter the program. They are forbidden to listen to anything other than "approved" radio stations. They are disciplined, if caught, by losing status in the program.

It's too bad. Rock radio, like the rest of society, has been spreading the anti-drug message in the last few years. If those kids at Straight had been listening, they would have heard numerous songs with anti-drug themes. Hardly a week passes when our news department doesn't have reports on anti-drug efforts. Rock musicians have become outspoken on the issue. WEBN has aired interviews with several stars talking about their personal drug problems, including the likes of David Crosby, Ozzy Osbourne, Dickie Betts, Bob Seger and Eddie Money.

I figured if Straight wasn't going to talk to WEBN, I'd ask professionals in the drug counseling community to talk about Straight. That turned out to be enlightening, yet frustrating.

The vast majority of counselors and mental health experts I talked to were privately concerned about Straight's methods. In fact, one care-unit official said several of their admissions were Straight "grads."

Would any of these experts go on the record? All were reluctant. The reason most cited had to do with professional courtesy. The same reason doctors and lawyers are reluctant to speak out against their colleagues. One adolescent care-unit director told me he was worried that any anti-Straight statement would just look like he was trying to drum up patients for his own program.

The "Catch 22" of this situation was made clear when I received a call from a mother whose son had a bad experience at Straight. She had withdrawn him from the program and placed him in a care unit, where she was told by counselors that her son's Straight experience was not unique. She was contacting the media because "if all those drug counselors think there's something wrong there, why don't they go public and warn other parents?"

There is an understandable reluctance for professionals to criticize another drug rehab program. For one thing, drug rehabilitation is not an exact science. Some programs consider themselves a success if their "cure" rate is 50 percent. And there is the powerful belief in these times of "just say no," that any program treating

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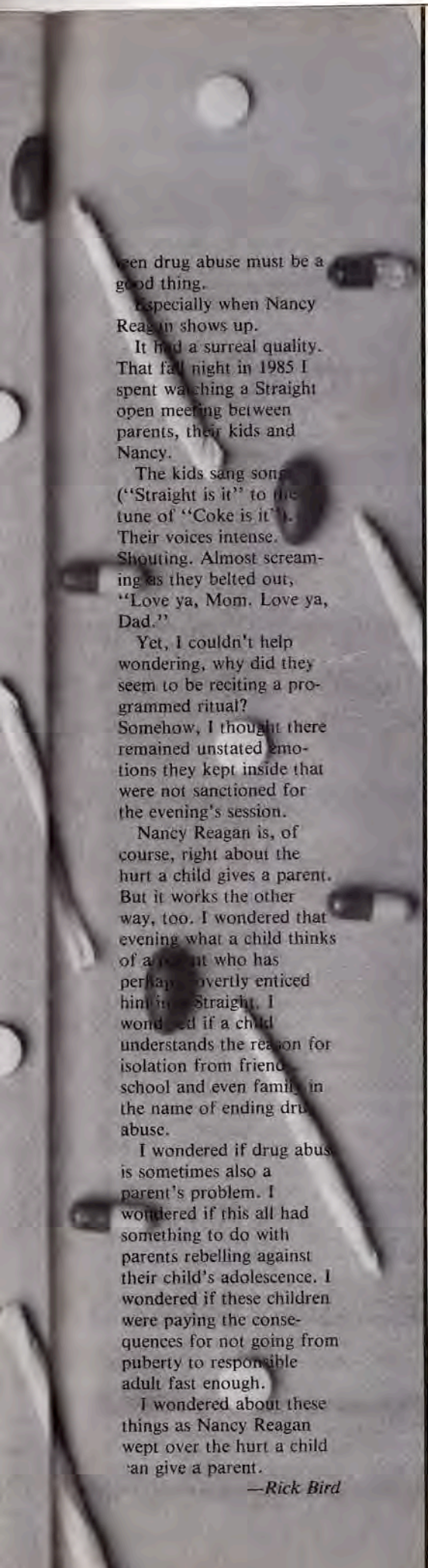

een drug abuse must be a good thing.

Especially when Nancy Reagan shows up.

It had a surreal quality. That fall night in 1985 I spent watching a Straight open meeting between parents, their kids and Nancy.

The kids sang songs ("Straight is it" to the tune of "Coke is it"). Their voices intense. Shouting. Almost screaming as they belted out, "Love ya, Mom. Love ya, Dad."

Yet, I couldn't help wondering, why did they seem to be reciting a programmed ritual? Somehow, I thought there remained unstated emotions they kept inside that were not sanctioned for the evening's session.

Nancy Reagan is, of course, right about the hurt a child gives a parent. But it works the other way, too. I wondered that evening what a child thinks of a parent who has perhaps covertly enticed him into Straight. I wondered if a child understands the reason for isolation from friends, school and even family in the name of ending drug abuse.

I wondered if drug abuse is sometimes also a parent's problem. I wondered if this all had something to do with parents rebelling against their child's adolescence. I wondered if these children were paying the consequences for not going from puberty to responsible adult fast enough.

I wondered about these things as Nancy Reagan wept over the hurt a child can give a parent.

—Rick Bird

Cont. from p. 161

anything.' They ask parents, 'How are you going to feel when your child cops out and dies?' "

Christy says that she had tried pot once and drinking twice when she entered Straight. Her mother and stepfather believe her. "Her dad called me and said that she had been doing drugs for two years. I was appalled," Shelly says. "Rick and I have done more drugs than she has ever heard of, and we would know." The Rybolts were even more appalled when they heard Christy recite a litany of drug use at her first open meeting—pot, alcohol, mescaline.

Christy says it wasn't true. She says that no professional staff was present at her admission interview, commonly called intake, and she was pressured by other Straight clients to "confess." "One girl said that she had done mescaline, and that sounded good. So I just said I did pot, alcohol, speed and mescaline. It's done all the time. It's a desperate feeling. A lot of girls lied, just to get people off their backs." Other Straight alums confirmed this practice. "People would always build it up, elaborate on what drug use they had done," Davia says. "This one guy I knew from school was up there saying that he did PCP and all these other drugs. Now no way did this guy ever do this, but he was making out like, 'Yeah, I'm really hard-core.' Maybe he was thinking that if he confessed to all this, they would leave him alone." It was as if, at Straight, the greater the sin, the greater the redemption.

"People would leave the program and do drugs, because they would hear about all these drugs and they would run away to try them," Davia adds. "People would say, 'It was really weird; I was seeing all these spots,' and people were really curious about it."

A number of the former Straight clients said they had minimal experience with drugs or alcohol before entering the program. Glick says that careful medical and psychiatric assessment of clients upon admission—including blood testing and urinalysis—ensures that only kids needing treatment will be accepted. If anything, parents and staff underestimate drug use, he says. "Most parents are unaware of drug use for two years," he says. "Parents come here after a crisis with a gut feeling that something is wrong, knowing 15 percent of what is wrong with the kid. By their own admission, kids get very skilled at deceiving parents."

Curiously, for a program that emphasizes the thorough medical and psychiatric evaluation of potential clients, Straight placed an ad in the September 28, 1986, Cincinnati *Enquirer* advertising for an admissions counselor/intervention specialist with "sales and marketing experience" listed as the only qualifications.

One fifth-phaser at Straight came into the program after being in a psychiatric ward. Describing herself as "a punk with a mohawk," she says that she had only smoked pot and experimented with alcohol a couple of times. She was hanging out at the Jockey Club in Newport, using a fake ID, and slam-dancing with friends who were doing drugs. Such an individual, categorized as high risk, is appropriate for treatment, Glick contends. "I don't draw a distinction between use and abuse; any use is unacceptable. People are saying that the use of alcohol and marijuana is a rite of passage of adolescence. That's like saying that polio is a rite of passage."

According to one local psychiatrist who has worked extensively in care units, spot diagnoses are extremely difficult to make. He says he turned down a position as a consulting psychiatrist at Straight because of the program's apparent failure to make distinctions between drug use and drug dependency. "The philosophy seemed to be if a kid casually used a drug once or twice, he would be treated as if that were a drug dependency."

Some families say that this approach escalated a workable family problem into an enormous one. The Rybolts say they became hostages of Straight. "The most amazing thing to me is that you believe," Shelly says. "I signed a paper saying that I would give up my visitation rights if I pulled out of the program. Why? Because they told me to. I couldn't be in the program until I did."

Rick, a park superintendent and chief ranger in the Butler County Park District, laughs incredulously when he remembers his acquiescence to Straight policies. "Everything you did, you had to get permission from staff. Children told me whether to go on a business trip or not," Rick says. Husbands and wives were encouraged to tattle on spouses who went on unauthorized business trips, the couple recalls. They even threw out a 175-album collection, including vintage Beatles albums from England, to symbolize their liberation from a druggie past. "They said, 'Double standards, Mom. You can't keep your records and expect her to get rid of hers,' " Shelly recalls.

At parent raps, the parents sing Up With People-type songs and are expected to make the accompanying hand gestures. If they don't, they are con-

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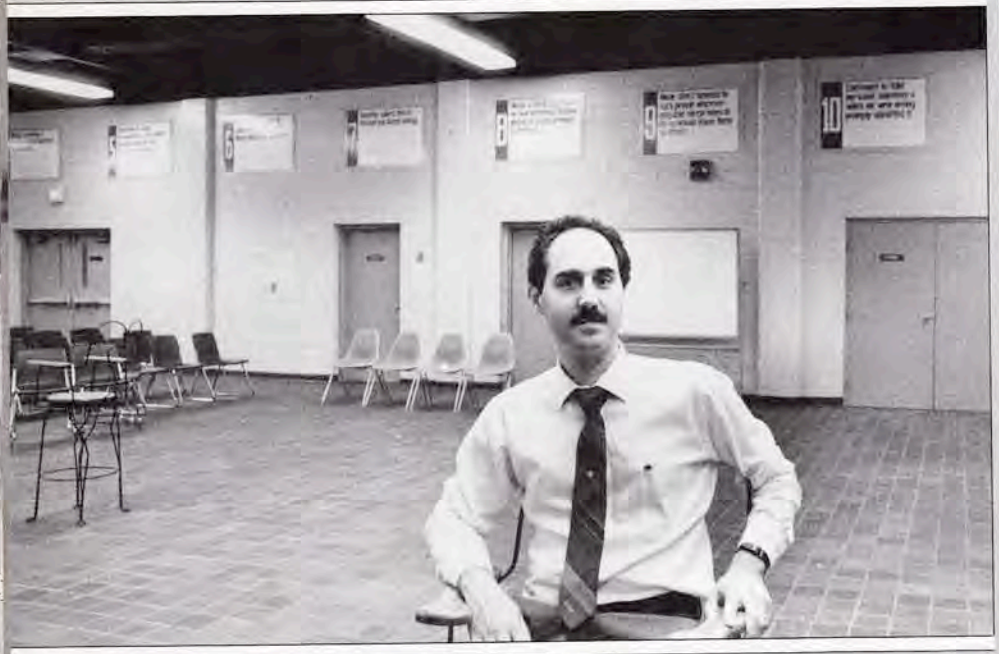
The [redacted] family—Rick, Angie, Shelly and their daughter, Christy [redacted] (foreground)—tried to adapt to Straight policies and philosophy, but found that it was tearing their family apart.



Straight director William Glick sits in the room where open meetings and group raps are held. Straight's twelve steps, based on those of Alcoholics Anonymous, line the wall behind him.

fronted. "I made some comment to my husband. One mother was put out that I would talk during group, and that I wasn't singing. 'What's the matter with you, Mom?' " Shelly recalls her saying. Rosemary Weaver remembers being terrified when one parent confronted another for not singing, saying, "I'm glad my kids aren't in your house." "I was scared to death because I wasn't singing 'Zippidy-Doo-Dah' and not making hand motions," Rosemary says. "Then I felt stupid. Why am I afraid because I'm not singing these nursery rhymes?"

The group confronted Rosemary for telling Eric during open meeting about the birth of baby ducklings at their Loveland home. "I just wanted to give him a ray of hope," Rosemary says apologetically. "But pets and 'heavies'—sad subjects—couldn't be discussed in open meetings. We could only talk about feelings."

Parents become numbed into accepting things they shouldn't, the Rybolts say. One father in a parent rap said how sorry he was for having molested his two daughters in the past. The Rybolts were concerned because this man was acting as a host parent, but they said nothing.

Glick says that telling outsiders of such an incident is a serious violation of patient confidentiality. Host homes are screened carefully, he says, and any recent or untreated history of sexual abuse would disqualify parents. Straight uses the guidelines for foster homes in its host home check. "If the sexual abuse happened long ago, and the individual received treatment, it might be appropriate for the family to serve as a host home. If there's any question, we won't use them. We're bound by child abuse reporting laws. There's no gray area. Our policy is that if there's any indication that a client is suffering sexual or physical abuse or neglect, that report has to be on my desk immediately."

Finally, the Rybolts couldn't take it any more. "One night, I was in the bedroom lying on the bed," Shelly recalls. "I felt, 'If I pull from Straight I'm a terrible mother, and if I stay in Straight I'm going to commit suicide.' "

Rick is thumping the table with a book, *Destructive Cults Defined,* that he used in recent police training. He looks the way you imagine a park ranger—friendly, bearded face, fit, a man who is

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comfortable with himself and the out-of-doors. "This is Straight," he says emphatically. "Straight met twenty-three of the twenty-six criteria for cults, as defined in this book. Their whole theory in this book is that if you can't walk away from something, it could be dangerous."

The Rybolts walked away. They didn't see Christy for ten months. Finally they saw a lawyer.

After more legal wrangling—and much anxiety for the Rybolts and their daughter—Christy was court-ordered out of Straight and into the custody of her mother. After a consultation, the court referee told her, "You have no more business being in Straight than I have."

Rosemary Weaver worries about the effect Straight could have on families that aren't as strong as her own. "What really disturbs us is that if kids are terminated, their parents will just disown them," she says. "The parents feel that Straight was the last resort, and there's nothing more they can do. They don't seek other help, other than the police. One mother told me that her daughter called to wish her a happy birthday, and she hung up on her. She said she wouldn't talk to her daughter until she came back to Straight. The girl was 15."

Richard Mullinax was living on the streets in Washington, D.C., and his family wouldn't let him inside the door. If his sisters saw him on the street, they would look the other way. He had left Straight twice. "If they had given an inch, I wouldn't be alive today. I was doing pot three or four times a day and doing cocaine. I was underweight fifty-five pounds. I came crawling back on my hands and knees. They gave me the option of going back to the program. It saved my life."

Families who pull from Straight often question the sincerity and depth of the program's much-vaunted love for its clients. "All of a sudden, they totally alienate anyone who leaves. Parents are brainwashed as much as anyone," Shelly says. When the Weavers went to Eric's host home to pick up his belongings, the family wouldn't answer the door. "Someone came to the peephole and said, 'God, it's the Weavers. We can't have any contact with pulloffs.' The connotation was that it was something disgusting," Rosemary says.

Emotional honesty is one of the tenets that Straight promotes most strenuously. Many clients and former clients say that the program taught them to confront their true selves. "Straight worked for me because it was more intense in the sense of my talking about past feelings and getting out my feelings," says Tom Aulicino. "I was as low as a person could be, and I needed honest friendships. The guys were like brothers—nice, sincere. I learned how to cry and talk about my feelings."

Others wonder if Straight's brand of emotional honesty isn't more like manipulation or exhibitionism. "They make you feel so bad that you lean on them so much," Christy says. "They cut you down and get you so dependent on them to feel better that you think, 'What would I do without Straight?' "

Privacy disappears when a family enters Straight, some say, and an enforced intimacy takes its place. Every Straight mother is Mom, every father is Dad. "It's all so fake," Davia says. "People were always saying, 'Love ya, Davia.' I thought, 'You don't love me, you don't even know me.' It was really easy to say what they wanted, but I'm not someone who loves to tell people about personal problems. I was often thinking, 'This is none of your business.' "

Confidences that she made in group were exploited to elicit an emotional response later, Davia says. "I have had problems with my dad and would feel resentful, and they'd use that, saying 'Your dad doesn't care about you. Your dad has more than enough money to fly down here.' " Because Davia's father lives in Canada and couldn't fly down to be "checked out" by Straight staff, she was unable to talk with him for ten months.

During first phase, kids have no opportunity to talk frankly with their parents. The five-minute sessions are attended by a staff member. "If you complained to your parents on Friday nights, you would get sent back and wouldn't get to talk," Davia says.

Some kids cultivated the art of crying on command. "If I was being confronted, tears were always good," Casey [redacted] says with a sly smile. Molly adds, "When they ask you in group, 'What are your feelings from the past?' you'd better start crying, buddy."

The explosive nature of some of the revelations in parent raps and open meetings troubled the Rybolts. "One woman needed counseling for a violent time in her life, but not in the context of hundreds of people, being led by other Straight parents," Rick says. "I kept thinking, 'Who are you, mister? You probably sell cars on the weekends, and you're prodding this woman.' There was one tough old guy, and they had the man in tears, needling him, trying to get him to put out feelings. He kept saying, 'I don't want you to know.' It's like standing on Fountain Square and being forced to tell these things."

There is indeed something almost automated about Straight ritual. Before a recent open meeting, staffer Marti [redacted] reminded the parents that there was to be no mint-sucking or gum-chewing during the meeting. Then she asked brightly, "And what kind of meeting are we going to have?" "Positive!" the parents thundered back on cue.

Although the parents' comments sound heartfelt, the kids' confessions often sound breathless and sing-songy, like schoolchildren rushing through the Pledge of Allegiance. Perhaps it is because they are following a specific format. All begin, "My name is so-and-so, and I do believe I'm a druggie. The drugs that I've done in the past are. . . ." They also tell about one incident from the past and about changes they plan to make.

"Ritual is important to maintain a structure," says Will Kniseley, director of therapy at Straight, who holds a master's degree in clinical social work. "It gives predictability so that we don't have to ask, 'What kind of rap are we going to have?' It's more comfortable, and there's none of the anxiety of not knowing."

Are Straight's restrictions and structures necessary, or are they symptomatic of a hysteria about certain things—rock music, rebelliousness—that are a normal part of adolescence? "Our family—we don't believe in drug abuse or unprovoked violence," Rosemary says thoughtfully. "We want good things for our kids. We want our son to grow up and go to college. Growing up these days is tough. There is a point when they rebel and it's natural and healthy. Parents with Straight have what they want for a time, a kid with very short hair. But I'm not sure it's really healthy."

Some Straight kids complain that the program has peculiar ideas about boy-girl relationships. Clients are not

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allowed to date until six months after they graduate. Casey got sent back once for hugging a girl. "Well, she more or less hugged me," he demurs. And Davia says that her sister—who was 22—was screamed at for admitting that she likes sex. "In the girls' rap, they would talk about sexual problems and be very explicit. I was really embarrassed," Davia says. "My sister would say, 'I liked it and I liked him.' People would say, 'You're not feeling good about yourself and you're hanging onto that.' She's a woman; what are they talking about? I thought it wasn't right, that they wanted to get so much into her business." Several girls described being yelled at and called a slut or a "sleaze" during their intake or group raps.

Straight staff and clients seem preoccupied with appearance, talking about hairstyles and clothing as if fashion itself were a form of substance abuse. "Even if a kid has relatively mild drug abuse—has only been drunk once or had a few cigarettes—it makes sense to me for them to enter the program. Kids fall into categories not on the amount of drugs they have done, but how disabling it is. Signs are kids tattooing arms and piercing ears," Dr. Heyman says. "They say you can't tell a book by its cover, and I say show me a boy with an earring and I'll show you a boy on drugs. A kid into sports, family and citizenship is not going to be on drugs. We're not 100 percent, but we have a high level of suspicion. If you have four kids on a street corner wearing suits and four at another corner wearing acid rock t-shirts, chances are that one group is selling drugs and the other is not. You act a little on instincts."

During an afternoon rap, the girl of the former mohawk has an emotional confrontation with a new client who comes in sporting a "Simply Red" do. Fighting back tears, she tells him that his appearance brings back painful memories. She recalls the trauma of going back to school when she reached third phase. "I didn't want to face my best druggie friend. She looked awful, all punked out, and I felt guilty. I thought it was all my fault because she was imitating my old image. She never looked like that until I came to school." Does the girl still have a drug problem? "I drank twice with her, but she didn't get drunk," the girl replies. "She's one of my drug-free druggie friends. Some people have druggie friends who don't do drugs, but who were weak with them." Despite her initial discomfort, this 17-year-old fifth-phaser is thriving in school, founding an art and literary magazine and participating in the art club.

Clothing and appearance matter because a drug rehabilitation program must encompass the teen's whole culture, whole lifestyle, Glick says. "It's very important that the kids make a clean break. I saw a television program that focused on occupational therapy in another treatment center. They showed a girl silk-screening an Ozzy Osbourne t-shirt. That's drug and sexually oriented."

The question most critical to desperate parents is also the one most difficult to answer: how effective is Straight? Staffers generally cite a success rate of 70 percent after two years among graduates. The program has the lowest dropout rate of any in the country, Glick says.

"Groucho Marx says, 'Who do you believe, me or your own eyes?' " Will Kniseley tells a group of visiting parents, "I've seen people in treatment, and their lives don't lie. They're healthy young people, and they stand tall." A former director of a private treatment program, Kniseley says, "This program is radically different. If I had a success rate of 20 percent, I was euphoric."

"Our adolescents are lost," Dr. Fisher says. "If you provide structure, in the end the kids who click realize that it was care. Most, by the time treatment is done, realize that someone had to clamp down on them in order for them to improve. I've seen people fail at care units, and the impression I get is that there is not enough structure, there are drugs hidden in the ceiling."

Other mental health professionals wonder about the long-term effects of such an approach. An internalized treatment program is ultimately more powerful than a rigid, external program like Straight's, in the opinion of Lawrence Valmore, district administrator of the Clermont County Family Service in the Cincinnati area. "I like to compare it to the exoskeleton and the endoskeleton—the forms of life that have an exoskeleton don't adapt as well as those with a limited external shell," Valmore says. "I've seen halfway houses run with a rigid external structure. When people are living in rigid structures, they can't make mistakes and can't learn from their mistakes. That's part of the reason that people come from prison without being rehabilitated. There's no way to learn. There's value in the early stages for much tighter control, because there's security and safety in that. The endoskeleton gives support, but not so narrowly defined that it limits."

Peer pressure is valuable, Valmore believes, but it must be used judiciously, and the adolescents must be carried beyond that—into the dangerous waters of individuality. "Using things like the belt loops is dangerous. It shows no trust, and it's devaluing. It says that we value the absence of drugs more than simple human dignity—that they're less important as human beings than the drugs are. Which is precisely how they got into drugs in the first place," Valmore says. "Peer pressure has shadings and gradations. A 12- and 13-year-old has very strong associations with peers. Ideally they'll grow beyond that. Programs like Straight keep kids developmentally at that level. The strength is in identification with a group, all of whom talk the same way and dress the same way."

Straight undeniably has helped some kids, and perhaps saved lives. Even some kids who are bitter or ambivalent about the program acknowledge that it diminished or stopped their drug use. "I learned to be more responsible and organized, taking care of two newcomers every day," Davia says. "I've learned a lot of things. I don't use as much as I used to." Mike [redacted] acknowledges that he was "scared Straight"—but that it was ultimately his friends from the program, and not Straight rules, that kept him off drugs. Another woman, who has a sibling in the program—and nearly co-opted into Straight herself as the result of a sibling interview—doesn't like the program, but believes that her brother probably would be dead if he hadn't gone through Straight.

And for those who are not saved? The scars are deep and perhaps permanent. There are those who believe that no end ever justifies such a means. Robert Weaver recalls a Monty Python joke that describes his feelings: a sick man came to a magician for a cure. The magician turned him into a newt.

"You turned me into a newt!" the man cried.

"Yes," the magician said. "But I cured you." □

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