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Straight Inc. Uses Teens to Help Turn Peers Against Drugs

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"I hate you," Todd told his parents. "I never want to see you again."

Maryann and Barry had involuntarily committed their 17-year-old son to a drug rehabilitation program for adolescents called Straight Inc., located in Washington, D.C.

It was the most wrenching thing they had ever done.

But Todd had been inhaling freon, smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. Formerly a good student and a loving son, he had lost interest in school. He had become violent, abusive and suicidal.

Their family life was a nightmare.

After three weeks in Straight, Todd hugged his mother and stepfather.

"I love you," he said. "Thank you for saving my life."

Barry and Maryann, who asked that their last name not be used, shared their experiences with Straight Monday night at a meeting of the Manheim Chemical People at Manheim Central Junior High School.

Straight, located in eight cities throughout the country, has chosen Lancaster County as the location for its next treatment facility. The nonprofit program will first open a referral center and then, after $435,000 is raised, the facility.

An adolescent is usually enrolled in Straight for 12 to 18 months, at a cost of $20 per day. During that time, the teen goes through the program's five phases, gradually earning more responsibility and freedom.

The adolescents stay with families of children who have progressed to one of the final phases. Much of the counseling is done by the teens in the program, "which was perfect for our son," Maryann said. "When he went into the program, he had no regard for adult authority. The other kids knew all about the conning, the manipulation and the lying. He couldn't con them."

Another important aspect of the program, Maryann said, is that it involves the whole family in counseling.

"We know that if we are not in treatment with our son, he'd be coming back to the same parents. Now we understand his disease, the struggle he's going through. We've become his number one support system."

The family therapy taught Maryann how she had "enabled" her son's drug problem by making excuses for him. But it also taught her not to feel guilty.

"It was his choice, not mine," she said. "He chose drugs as a way out."

Among the dozen or so people at the Chemical People meeting was a young woman named Ruth, who described herself an "ex-junkie." Although she graduated from a drug treatment program and has "been clean" for five years, she said her parents still feel responsible for her drug problem.

"My father's from the old school," she said. "He takes the guilt of what I do. There are people out there who believe that you didn't bring up a kid right if he has a problem like that."

She admitted, "The guilt trips you can play on your parents are unreal. You can be so manipulative. You know all the right buttons to push."

What finally saved Ruth, she said, was facing her problem. "The bottom line is you have to get honest."

Todd has been in Straight for 10 months and will probably remain in the program another five months. Maryann and Barry are jubliant about the progress he has made but realize he still has a struggle awaiting him.

"It seems we live in a gray world today," Barry said. "Our kid's philosophy was that it's OK if you don't get caught, then you're a smart guy. There was never any question of right or wrong.

"We learned you need to give kids a very clear message: drugs are wrong."

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