Straight Inc., a controversial drug-abuse treatment program for teen-agers, is approaching its fifth anniversary of operation in Pinellas County. These stories, the second of a two-part series on Straight, recount experiences of former Straight clients.

'Tough love' makes Straight successful, 2 graduates say . . .

By MILO GEYELIN
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

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Winston [redacted] — tanned, articulate and as wholesome-looking as a model in a breakfast cereal commercial — remembers that his life used to be a lot different.

There was a time, says the 19-year-old St. Petersburg Junior College student, when the only thing that really seemed to matter in life was drugs: where to find them, how to get them and where to find more.

He started at age 13, concentrating mostly on marijuana and beer, he says. Then, over the course of two years, he tried amphetamines, LSD, hashish and cocaine. When those drugs were not available, Winston, the son of a successful financial adviser, turned to the only high there was — paint thinner. He inhaled it.

BUT ALL OF that has changed now, and the reason, says Winston, was Straight Inc. Winston spent one year and nine months there. He says it turned his life around.

Winston and another Straight graduate spoke at length with *The St. Petersburg Times* about how they became involved with drugs, their experiences with Straight and why they think the program works.

See STRAIGHT, 4-B

St. Petersburg Times — JOE TONELLI

Michael Calabrese says he was questioned for nine hours in a small room.

. . . another youth tells of threats and intimidation

By MILO GEYELIN
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

On a sunny summer morning last July, 17-year-old Michael [redacted] and his mother walked in through the front door of Straight Inc.

They thought they were there, they say, to talk to Straight staff members about Michael's younger brother, who was being treated at Straight for drug abuse. An administrative assistant at Straight had written Michael's father in Kissimmee to say it was "an important part of (the younger brother's) program to firmly establish the relationship to other members of the family."

But Michael says he didn't talk much about his brother that day.

INSTEAD, HE SAYS, he was taken to a room with Straight staff members, where he was questioned about himself for nine hours.

And his mother says that by the time she saw him again late that afternoon, she found him crumpled in a chair in a small, brightly lit room.

He was crying.

See THREATS, 4-B

...ight from 1-B

Both number among the roughly 800 clients (up from the 600 previously reported by Straight Inc.) who have successfully completed the Straight program, says Adminstrative Director Miller Newton. Newton, who does not have any exact figures, estimates that based on the numbers of teens who have completed the program, roughly two-thirds of the teen-agers and families who have been involved in Straight look back on it favorably.

Winston's relationship with his parents began to slip before he became involved with drugs, he says, but drugs made the problem worse.

"I'D SAY there was really no relationship there (with his parents) at all," he says now. "We really never talked or communicated . . . I always thought my parents didn't know as much as I did about anything. I didn't like my Dad's authority. Most of the time we did talk, it was mostly arguments.

"I didn't have any direction — most 13-year-olds don't," he says. "But after I started using drugs, I never looked into the future or what I was going to do with my life."

The reason, he says, was peer pressure. "I felt inadequate around my friends, and when I saw they were starting to use drugs, it was kind of the thing to do. I felt like maybe if I started smoking pot . . . I figured I'd get up with them, I'd be more on their level."

Mrs. [redacted] could see the change in her son, she says. "When I found out Winston was smoking pot, I felt, well, he's experimenting. It's a phase, he'll go through it . . . But what I saw it do with my brothers and sisters and friends — they went through hell during those four or five years while the kids were doing pot, wrecking the car, truancy from school, all kinds of things . . . He hadn't gotten to that. He cloistered himself off in his room and his grades were dropping . . ."

That pattern is much like 21-year-old Nancy [redacted] who was in the Straight program for a year and one month. Nancy started taking drugs after her parents divorced when she was 14. She, her sister, her brother and her mother moved into a small Pinellas Park subdivision where drug use among teen-agers was popular. Her brother's friends took drugs, so Nancy started, too. "I think it was mostly for friends that I did it," she says. "I wanted to do something to get into the crowd."

THREE YEARS later, Nancy says, she was drinking hard liquor, smoking marijuana, taking amphetamines, barbituates, hashish and opium regularly. Once she tried cocaine. Another time, she says, she tried morphine.

Her grades and family life also began to deteriorate, she says. She started staying out late at night, vandalizing and "stealing for kicks."

Both Winston and Nancy were signed into the program by their parents. Neither went willingly. That was before a state law was passed that requires persons in drug-abuse programs to enter them voluntarily.

"When I first got there, there was no way . . . I couldn't believe I was there," says Winston, who ran away from Straight twice, only to be returned by his parents.

Looking back on it now, though, both Winston and Nancy agree that the best thing about Straight was the closeness, a kind of "tough love" that they say encourages frank, gloves-off counseling from peers about the way they are handling themselves in the large, group "rap" sessions. It is during the raps that the teen-agers are expected to tell the group about their past offenses, how they were affected by them and how they will better themselves in the future.

"TOUGH LOVE is giving a person really what he needs, even if he doesn't want it," says Winston. "That's not always telling the person where they're at . . . and showing them that you're angry . . . It's sometimes easier using empathy and trying to relate to the person, or something like that."

The raps, broken up into morning, afternoon and evening sessions, make up the bulk of the "teen-agers helping teen-agers" therapy at Straight. How teen-agers express themselves during the raps is the basis by which their progress is judged by the other teen-agers and, ultimately, what determines when they are ready to leave Straight.

Progress is marked by advancement through a series of five phases — each of which allows the teen-ager more freedom — that lead to completion of the program. Straight Administrative Director Miller Newton says the first phase usually lasts three to four weeks; the second lasts two to three weeks; the third lasts four to six weeks; the fourth is at least a month long and the fifth phase lasts one to three months. Newton says the average length of total involvement in the program is about 11½ months.

Nancy remembers standing before the group and getting "put down" for being dishonest. The difference with her was that she really was being dishonest, she says now. "Sure. I did that, too (lied to score points with the group). I stood up and said, 'Hey, I think I'm grand and glorious and really don't think I need to be here.' "

BUT OTHER clients at Straight who knew her before she came to the program "would turn around and be honest with me . . . and say, 'What about this? Do you remember this that you did?' . . . It's a hard thing to face up to when you get caught up in your own mess," Nancy says.

"For me it was super hard because I was so used to having these quick little comebacks, fast little things to get people off the subject, but here (at Straight) if you do that kind of stuff, you get nailed. The whole group would be silent and somebody would say this thing to you, and you would just stop. You can't go anywhere. You have to sit there and listen.

"There were times when people would say things that weren't true, and I'd know that within myself. But that's where applying what you learn in the program comes in . . . If it doesn't apply you don't use it. If it does apply and it hits home and you know it, that's where you can do some changing . . ."

Winston and Nancy are grateful to Straight. "I had feelings, but before (going to Straight) I would always suppress them and push them down," says Winston, who wants to study psychology at St. Petersburg Junior College. "When I did finish the program, I was able to express my feelings. I had a lot more confidence in myself, a lot more self-esteem, which I never had."

"I FEEL like it's a 180-degree turnaround," says Nancy. "I'm going somewhere. I'm going to school. I'm making steps. I'm doing something for myself . . . I've got the confidence to go on now. It's totally different."

Winston would like to major in psychology at a university when he finishes junior college. After that, he hopes to get accepted in a staff position at Straight. Nancy will graduate from St. Petersburg Junior College this fall. For the past three years, since leaving Straight, she has worked at Montgomery Ward. She lives with her mother now and has recently become interested in religion, she says. Eventually, she would like to work with kids before they become vulnerable to drug abuse, she says.

The kind of people whom Straight can't help, says Winston, are those "who don't feel they have any problems . . . the type of people who aren't committed to helping themselves, the type of people who don't make decisions . . . Further on the line, they're eventually going to have to take responsibility for their own lives or they're going to end up in jail — or another program."

St. Petersburg Times — JOE TONELLI

Straight involves more than just drugs, says Nancy. "The program changes attitudes . . . It really helps change your attitudes, your beliefs. It really lets you check inside yourself and say, 'Hey, what's best for me?' and to stop worrying about the other guy. I think anybody can use it."

Threats

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Threats from 1-B

That day, after he says he was threatened with a court order that would keep him in Straight for two years, Michael signed himself in "voluntarily." Florida law requires that clients in drug treatment programs sign themselves in voluntarily — although they can be required to do so by court order — but Straight does not have the legal authority to produce court orders. No drug program does.

Straight Executive Director James Hartz and Administrative Director Miller Newton have declined to discuss the specifics of [redacted] son, who was at Straight the day Michael signed himself in, denies that the teen-ager was threatened with a court order.

Michael's charge that he was threatened with a court order by adult staff members at Straight is not isolated. A recent Florida Departent of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) monitoring report revealed that several clients interviewed randomly by HRS officials also told of being threatened by administrative staff members with being forced into the program by court order. After a story appeared in *The St. Petersburg Times* in April detailing the results of the HRS inspection, several other former clients contacted *The Times* to report similar treatment by Straight staff members.

MICHAEL CONCEDES he had a headful of problems before he went to Straight. His parents have been divorced about 10 years, but the court agreed to let him live with his mother about a year ago, even though his father retained legal custody of him and his brother. Michael says he wanted to move in with his mother because he had difficulties with his father.

Michael admits that for two years, he smoked marijuana once or twice a week. Occasionally he drank beer. He once smoked a marijuana cigarette that someone later told him had cocaine in it. And he did poorly in high school his junior year. Michael says he flunked tests on purpose to spite his father.

Dr. Anthony [redacted] a radiologist in Kissimmee, has declined all comment on his sons' cases. But Michael says his father blames their troubles at home on drugs. That was why Michael's brother was in Straight, where he remains now. And that was why Michael went there with his mother.

MICHAEL HAD a fulltime summer job at a supermarket in Kissimmee at the time he went to the interview last July 19. The night before, he says, he had unloaded semitrailer trucks and stocked shelves from midnight to dawn, then drove to St. Petersburg with his mother for the 9 a.m. appointment.

When they arrived, Michael says, he was taken into a small room, called an "intake room," by two Straight clients known as peer counselors. He was seated and the door was shut, he says. His mother was taken somewhere else.

He asked them how long he was going to be, Michael says. They told him they didn't know.

"I said, 'Why am I here?'

"They didn't know . . .

"And then they said, 'Well, talk about yourself.' . . . So I tell them I work at Winn-Dixie unloading trucks . . .

"Then, after an hour of trying to figure out what's going on, they say, 'Well, do you do any drugs?'

"I said I just smoke pot and drink beer."

A STAFF TRAINEE entered the room with a note pad and recited a list of drugs, asking Michael which drugs he did.

"I said pot and beer.

"He said pot and alcohol.

"Then he rang out a whole bunch of other drugs . . .

" 'PCP (animal tranquilizer)?'

" 'No.'

" 'Thai stick (a very potent form of marijuana from

" 'Mushrooms (organic hallucinogens)'?

" 'No.'

"You name it. 'Cocaine?'

" 'No.'

"After a while, I had it all memorized . . . It was real casual at first, then they started 'heavying up.' "

At different times, when he motioned to leave, Michael says, the Straight staff members moved towards the door and blocked his way. When he asked to go to the bathroom, he was led, flanked by the two teen-agers, to the bathroom. Then, he says, he was taken back to the in-

"Then he says, 'Well, you got an attitude.' And I told him, 'Well, I'm tired of you all asking . . . I'm tired, I've got work to do (that night), I've got to get some sleep . . .'

"He (Newton) says, 'How many days ago did you smoke pot?' I said, 'A week, week-and-a-half ago.'

"So he lifts up my glasses and I guess my eyes were red. He said, 'Bulls---, you're lying. We're tired of this, you've got to start telling the truth.' "

"I stood up and screamed and yelled at him. 'F--- you! You don't know I've been working these past 12 hours. You don't know I haven't been sleeping. You don't know what the heck you've been putting me through!'

"He was yelling at me and I was yelling at him and my temper was going — Pshew! Then he yelled that that was the reason I had to be in the program. I said, 'What, get me in this place?'

"AND THEN, you know, it just hit me like . . . They're trying to put me in."

Other staffers, including adults, joined the interview, Michael says. "They would ask me what I do for kicks when I'm not doing drugs. I told them I like to run on a course and they would accuse me of lying and say people don't do things like that.

"They asked a lot of general questions. They said, 'Do you have a girlfriend?' I told them, 'Yes.' They said, 'Do you like her?' I said, 'Yes.' 'Do you use her?' 'No.'

"Then they said, 'Do you neck?' I said, 'Yeah, sometimes.' Then they said, 'Well, you're using her.'

"I mean, they just blew things way out of proportion. They made me feel like I wasn't half my weight, that I needed the program."

"They said it was my fault that me and my dad couldn't get along. I *chose* to make him upset . . . It wasn't anybody's fault but my own," Michael says. "I wasn't 'a man' because instead of staying there (with his father) and fixing it up, I left. They tried to blame it on me . . .

"THEY SAID I didn't have any responsibility because of my school record . . ."

And then, Michael says, they started talking about what Straight could do for him. They told him, he said, "that me and my dad's relationship would be better, we'd do things together more (if he joined Straight)."

Straight, Michael says he was told, would give him "four years of college swareness." He would "become better aware of the truth and be able to use it to keep from getting hurt by other people. 'You'd be able to talk about feelings, the real things in life . . .' " Michael says he was told.

A Straight staff member told him his mother "couldn't handle herself. She couldn't handle me. She couldn't handle my brother. She didn't know what she was doing," Michael says.

The only reason Michael's mother wanted him to live with her was so she could collect child support, Michael says he was told by an adult staff member.

In one of Straight's offices, meanwhile, Mrs. Marler says she was waiting to see her younger son. The people who talked to her, though, "sort of dropped (the younger boy) after a bit . . . and said it's usually the sibling that has the problem . . ." She said they told her that it would probably be Michael, not his brother, who had the more

member) said to me . . ." Mrs. Marler says. "I was telling her that he's a good worker at his job, I know the manager. I know that he spends a lot of time working on machinery, cars — whatever. He likes to read. He's thinking about going back to school . . . about going into the Winn-Dixie management program. I know his friends, the girls that he would see.

"They said, 'No. This is a coverup. This is all a coverup.' She was discounting everything I said. It was almost like she wasn't listening to me. I suppose they were trying to convince me that he did have a problem."

"Before they brought me in to see him (Michael)," Mrs. Marler says, "they were telling me, 'Did I know about his stealing (from his father), did I know about his assault and battery with a deadly weapon (against his stepmother), did I know about his homosexuality (with his brother) . . .' " Michael, they told her, had confessed to all of this, she says. Michael vehemently denies that he either committed any of these acts or confessed to them.

ABOUT 4 P.M., Mrs. Marler says, she was taken to see her son. "He (Michael) was crying and he could hardly talk . . . He was in a corner and they were in a semicircle" around him. [redacted] her former husband, was there too.

Michael claims he was told by Straight staff members, including Newton, that Straight already had a court order that would force him into the program. When they said that, Michael looked up at his father, and [redacted] nodded his head up and down, Michael says.

If he signed, he could go home in 14 days and complete the program in three months, Michael says he was told. If he refused, the court order would force him into the program anyway. If that happened, he would not be able to go home again for 30 days and would have to remain in the program two years, he says.

After two more hours, Michael says, he signed.

"They convinced me that I was a druggie and I needed help . . . that I was disrespectful in all respects because I was already telling off Mr. Newton," Michael says. "Just all of a sudden, I felt lowly of myself. They made my self-opinion go down. Just the constant 'You're no good' bit. 'You're a druggie. You're a druggie.' I mean, when you hear that and you have no control, I mean there was nothing I could do."

NEWTON AND HARTZ declined to discuss Michael's version of the events or give their own. Whether the program accepts a client, says Newton, is determined by interviews with parents, previous counselors, school officials, police and other children or relatives in the program. Neither he nor Hartz would say who was questioned about Michael prior to his interview.

In a general discussion, Newton said that one of the ideas behind the intake procedure is to get potential clients to admit their drug habits and to sign themselves into the program voluntarily.

"We have kids work with a kid until the kid admits to having a drug problem," Newton said. "Getting a kid to admit he has a drug problem is an arduous task, and admitting need of help . . . I don't really like to take a kid until I get the kid to own up. The kids usually get this in talking to them and pushing them, and I check their eyes.

"There are signs in the eyes that you can tell about if a kid is getting high pretty frequently . . ."

THE ACTUAL INTAKE procedure, says Newton, is "done by two other kids on the program who come and visit and mainly relate themselves, who share . . . their experiences as a druggie," he says. But an adult professional always gets involved, Newton says.

"We review what the kids (already in the program) have on them (the potential client). We go in and talk to the kid for a few minutes and talk to the parents and sign off," Newton says. "If there is a kid who is questionable, we usually have four or five peer staff members go in and

able, because we don't want to put the kid in the program who doesn't need to be here."

Newton denies using threats of court orders to frighten clients into joining Straight. "Michael is throwing the word 'threat' around very loosely. I do not threaten any kid. The facts are there is a degree in which family authority is coercion. That's reality."

"This program has never gone out and gotten a court order," says Hartz.

"The family takes the initiative. We cannot. We will

[illegible] father did try to obtain a court order to force Michael to go back. Straight sent its clinical psychologist, Dr. William Giesz, and a 17-year-old junior staff member to Orlando to testify on behalf of [redacted] The case was heard Oct. 15 in Orange County Circuit Court.

Michael's mother prepared for the court fight by having Michael examined by a psychiatrist, a psychologist and a physician. He was given a standard psychological examination.

The test results indicated Michael was "an adolescent experiencing situational family difficulties," that he was "sensitive to the opinions of others" and showed "considerable evidence of resentment of authority figures." The personality profile was "typical of adolescents who are experimenting with 'recreational drugs.' It is not a personality picture typical of those prone to abusing narcotics or other hard drugs," the report read.

HOWEVER, GIESZ, Straight's psychologist, testified "emphatically" that Michael needed further treatment, according to court transcripts. The Straight psychologist said he based his opinion on Michael's records when he entered the program three months earlier, as well as from from talking to other "youngsters on the staff," and from watching Michael in group sessions.

Giesz had not, however, seen Michael's most recent treatment records, did not know if the rest of the staff considered him ready to leave the program and never talked to Michael "one-on-one," court records show. The motion for the court order was denied.

"(The psychological test Michael was given) will not determine drug use," counters Newton. "The psychiatrist who — and the judge doesn't know this — but the psychiatrist who examined Michael was not qualified to determine adolescent drug abuse . . . It was a standard psychiatric report that missed a lot of symptomatic stuff that anyone who interviewed Mike who is a chemical-dependency counselor would have picked up. I can't discuss how I determined Mike had a drug problem."

Newton scoffs at the possibility that some clients may be bullied into joining Straight. "If you really want to look at what it takes to assault somebody's (self-esteem), it takes 30 to 60 days of 16- to 18-hour days," he says. So if somebody goes through a simple interview where kids are discussing things with them . . . if you have any self-worth at all, it doesn't disappear or diminish at all. Even with kids from broken homes.

"The only kids that have problems with self-worth are either kids who are emotionally disturbed or have a drug-use pattern."

Dr. Renu Das of Kissimmee, the psychiatrist who examined Michael at his mother's request, said, "Michael's problem was not drug-related. His profile was typical of the recreational drug abuser." The Straight experience might have helped Michael had his problem been drug-related, she says.

"THE PROBLEM was that his father was not fostering enough independence," the doctor said. "It's a common adolescent problem."

Michael lost his job at Winn-Dixie. After finishing high school last spring, he signed up with the Air Force and is scheduled to begin service in October. In the meantime he is holding down two jobs — stocking shelves for an Albertsons supermarket and cleaning rugs for a clean-

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