

# Parents At Odds Over Straight

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The new "intakes" stand nervously before the sea of parents and peers in the Straight auditorium at St. Petersburg, Fla. They are druggies and alcoholics. They are bad kids and scared kids and confused kids.

The confessions pour out: the tales of cocaine, acid, pot, uppers, downers, vodka and gin. If they hold back, the crowd presses for more, and out come the gut-wrenching stories of shattered lives and devastated families.

In private sessions, the intensity creates a therapeutic pressure-cooker. Endless counseling and rap sessions. Monotonous meals. Constant confrontation. Verbal poking and prodding. They are told how to dress, how to act and, frequently, how to think.

For some clients, the program works.

"My son told us it's the best thing he ever did in his life," said Rex Hartgraves of Vienna, who enrolled his 20-year-old alcoholic son in the St. Petersburg chapter seven months ago.

Other clients see different results.

"I think it's inhuman," said Patricia Wynne of Lebanon, Ohio, whose 13-year-old son was placed in the program two months ago by her ex-husband. "He's brainwashed. He's not even my son any more."

Hartgraves and other parents who endorse Straight use almost reverent terms to describe its work. Mel Riddile, director of the soon-to-be-opened Washington chapter, says the program's results are sometimes "like a miracle."

Last summer, William Burns of Burtonsville, Md., realized that he and his wife had reached a dead end in trying to cure their sons' drug habits. The 17-year-old boy was using any drugs he could get his hands on—marijuana, PCP, LSD, hashish, opium—according to his father. His grades in school plunged from an A average to failing marks. His 15-year-old brother was breaking into houses to find the money to support a drug habit.

Then friends told the Burns parents about Straight. One day last July, Burns packed the older son in the car and told him the family was going to Disney World in Florida. Instead, Burns drove to the concrete headquarters of Straight in St. Petersburg. Hours later, the rebellious youth was enrolled in the program.

Two weeks later Burns loaded his younger son in the car for the 18-hour drive on the pretense of saying goodbye to the brother.

"He didn't realize he was there to say 'hello,'" said Burns.

Although both youths are still several weeks away from leaving the program, Burns said, "They are the kids I knew before they got into drugs. . . . Both of the boys have thanked me" for putting them in Straight.

Patricia Wynne tells another story. She has hired an attorney to pull her 13-year-old son Michael out of the Cincinnati Straight. The youngster was put in the program by his father after repeated attempts to run away from home and indications that he was dabbling in drugs.

Wynne's attorney, Joanne Hash, said Michael gave the following description of the program during a court hearing last week:

"He had been in Straight 59 days. He had been subjected to counseling 12 hours a day in a windowless room. He had no outdoor exercise. His diet consisted of dry cereal and juice for breakfast, peanut butter and jelly for lunch with an apple or banana and chili for dinner most of the time. He was locked in a room every night. If was necessary to get up to go to the bathroom he must wake an oldcomer [a more advanced Straight client] to go with him."

Officials at Straight have little tolerance for parents they consider uncooperative. John Emmonds of Clearwater, Fla., said one of his daughters was kicked out of the program because of arguments he had with officials concerning a second daughter who was in the program.

"They [Straight officials] wanted me to be more humble," said Emmonds. "Woe be it to the parent who offers criticism. It is much tougher on the kid and the parent than I thought it would be."

With a large percentage of dropouts and runaways from the program, Straight officials said they expect criticism from the families of youngsters who aren't successful in shaking their drug and alcohol habits. At the same time, critics admit they've witnessed instances where the program works.

"The parents who support Straight are just as convinced that it's right as I'm convinced that it's wrong," said Wynne.