

Ex-Comedian Adopts Drugs Users For the Seed

By FRANK EDGE
FORT LAUDERDALE (UPI)—This is a love story. About an improbably leprechaun of a man and his 1,800 children fighting to turn off drugs — with tears, corny jokes, Christmas carols, the roughest of four-letter words, simple honesty and laughter. They've planted a seed to fight an epidemic — the teenagers who turn to drugs. It is an epidemic. You have to believe repeated testimony to five Congressmen examining child drug abuse nationwide that "50 per cent — maybe more — of our children are using drugs; everything from marijuana to heroin and cocaine."

"Not my little girl," says a small town mother. Months later she could be the same other, sitting tearfully in an abandoned plastics warehouse here on "family night" at "the seed." Her little girl, pink-cheeked and 15, stands and says: "I love you, Mom. I done pot when I was 11. I've been stoned lots of times on hash, mescaline, ups and downs when you didn't know it."

Then she breaks up into tears, sitting down as she says: "I love you all." There is a deafening shout of "love you, Mary" from 500 throats. Larry Pelligrini, 17, told Rep. Calude Pepper, D-Fla., and the House Select Committee on Crime and Drug Abuse at Miami this year that he sold drugs in four high schools. He could spot the "ruggies," his customers.

"I would take my home room, or any of my classes, and I would count the straight kids," Larry testified. "I would come up with maybe four, five at the most...out of the whole class, maybe 35 kids."

Larry has a shock of wheat-colored hair across his brow. He is slim, muscular, square-shouldered, the all-American boy — until you look closely at his reddened eyes, a pimply pinchedness over the cheek bones, nervous half gestures of his hands.

He told the Congressmen that in four years he committed more than 100 crimes, including 12 to 14 armed robberies, to support his drug habit.

Blonde Lybbi MacDonald is 19, looks 16, and was once on a \$200-a-day heroin habit. She had been to more than a half dozen psychiatrists and rehabilitation centers before she spent a year in an expensive Long Island boarding school of about 150 students.

She told the lawmakers she and two other girls "turned on just about the entire school" with drugs mailed to her by friends in Florida in the year's time.

The millions of dollars worth of anti-drug films shown in schools don't work, the young ex-addicts told the committee. They only heighten the curiosity of straight kids and make the "stoned" kids laugh.

Neither, they said, can parents — loving and concerned parents — keep their children straight.

"What have parents done or failed to do that contributed toward you getting on drugs?" Rep. James R. Mann D-S.C., asked the young witnesses.

"Nothing," said Sally Pace, a 16-year-old schoolteacher's daughter who had gotten her kicks from speed.

"Nothing at all," agreed Larry. "You mean the best parents in the world do not control the situation?" Mann asked.

"Right," said Larry. "Ids don't listen to their parents or teachers, or any other adults today," said Lybbi.

Earlier in the hearing, the committee asked why Larry had found himself "looking up to junkies" — the youths who shoot heroin.

"You know, to be cool," Larry said. "It seemed like they were the ones with all the chicks, you, everything is cool with them...like they just got it made."

Now Larry and Lybbi and hundreds of others, are straight. A program called "the Seed," started by a former nightclub comic named Art Barker, transformed them.

The kids at the Seed can't be coned when a young addict goes there for the intensified "rap sessions that are the heart of the program.

of nice words. So they caught me. They knew what I was going to do before I did it. They didn't let me get away with it. "I more or less coned myself into getting straight. I really did. I still today don't believe I am still straight," he added wonderingly.

"It is a miracle," Judge Alfonso Sepe of the Dade (Miami) County Criminal Court told the lawmakers. "It is the most fantastic program in the United States...the only genuine help available."

In the evenings, all members attend general sessions where staff members take turns leading discussions. "Open" sessions are held twice a week with parents, friends, teachers,

death." A new member goes through two weeks of "peer pressure" in a saturation program of daily sessions from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Boys and girls attend separate sessions during the day where individual programs are discussed and solutions suggested.

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miracle." "Mothers and fathers come to those open meetings and see their kid being honest for the first time, suddenly understanding this whole drug culture and how their kids got into it," Barker said.

"They suddenly understand why the attitude change, why the misery, why the unhappiness in the home, why the lack of communications. And suddenly they get a chance to start all over again, and their family is born there.

After three months, the member is considered "straight" but continues to attend sessions once or twice a week.

The cost per child for the three and a half months is about \$100 and parents are asked to make a \$100 donation. Many give more.

A federal grant of \$177,200 a year, matching funds, other grants and donations, have funded the operation by upward of \$300,000. This provides about \$110,000 for a staff of 26 and payments toward the new quarters in the former plastics factory.

Art Barker is a former stand-up comedian who once made up to \$1,000 a week on the Playboy Club circuit, hit the skids on liquor and came back to found a program to combat drug abuse that a Florida judge calls "a miracle."

Since he started "The Seed" on a decaying sailboat two years ago, Barker claims to have turned off drugs for more than 1,600 of the 1,800 young people aged 9 to 20 who have gone through his three-to-six month program.

"Seventy-five to 85 per cent of our high school kids are doing drugs today," Barker says. "If we don't do something that works, where will we be in 10 years?"

Barker grew up the hard way in Brooklyn, the middle of three children in an Irish Catholic family. "My father was a drunk," he said.

At the age of 8, he was selling razor blades door to door. He dropped out of school to get into World War II and downed six Japanese zeroes as a tall gunner on a bomber. He also acquired an Air Corps Lieutenant's bars, a taste of liquor and a large tattoo on his right forearm during a binge in Singapore.

After the war came the tough life of a budding comic: a wife, a child, and lots more liquor. "I was a lousy parent. I was on the juice," he said. "I've smoked pot, popped pills, but none of the hard stuff."

Barker found himself living in a wrecked auto with a mongrel dog named "Bandy" behind a used car lot in New Jersey. Then he found Alcoholics Anonymous.

He became a tireless worker

for AA, from the New York jails to the emergency wards of Bellevue Hospital.

From somewhere came a girl named Barbara, "A beautiful girl with a really beautiful mind and heart," who told him:

"You are destined to do something good. You have a second chance."

"The Seed was born when Barbara died in my arms," Barker said. "Seh was walking across the street to meet me when a drunk driver hit her."

"It was born when I was walking the streets at 4:30 in the morning with tears streaming down my face, praying and waiting for the bars to close so I couldn't get a drink."

He got the Seed going on his 1926 sailboat-home, then wheeled financial backing and moved it to a former plastics warehouse.

The program consists of three and a half months of "rap sessions" and brutal honest between the young addicts and their peers who have already gone through the program.

Along the way, Barker has had vigorous and profane exchanges with city hall, parish house, clinics, schools and

critics who say he is lining his pocket from the Seed, or that there is a lack of proper medical psychological and spiritual attention for his children.

He calls the criticism "garbage" and "lies" and points to his board of physicians on instant call, a financial board of prominent businessmen and his color-keyed records on each teen-ager, numbered to protect their privacy.

Other critics have charged there is no follow-up after the young ex-addicts leave the program.

"I've got the greatest CIA in the world working for me," Barker replies. "These kids and their parents are dedicated. You'd better believe they keep track of each other. They have pride in themselves and what they're doing."

He doesn't like interference. "I put this high fence around the joint, not to keep the kids in, but to keep the kooks out," he said. "The preachers come out here and demand to tell the kids where it's at. No way."

Barker is short and nervous, with a cigarette smoke forever curling from under his down-pointed nose. His teeth are

pointed and so are his ears behind the long sideburns. A short, thin thatch of sandy gray hair is brushed forward to hide a bald spot.

"I stopped him from talking, once," says Sister Teresa, Margaret, a sociologist and psychologist who is the lone "professional" on Barker's staff.

"When I first showed up here, I wore my nun's habit and Art took me out to see the kids."

"He opened his mouth, but for the first time, he couldn't talk to them," she recalled. "Now I keep my habit in the closet and wear a regular dress around here."

Barker now has a small army of dedicated parents behind him now, as well as the support of such groups as Sister Teresa's Roman Catholic Diocese and some politicians from city hall to Congress.

Barker named his program from what he thought was a Bible passage, incorrectly quoted by a friend, that "a little mustard seed can move a mountain."

"Someone else told me later it was wrong," Barker chuckled. "That's how uneducated I am."



THE SEED—Art Barker, 47, stands in front of building in Miami named "the Seed", the headquarters of a program he founded to take teenagers away from the world of drugs. Barker, a former night club comedian, whose program has seen great success, says, "I just feel the love all around me."

PGDN—UPI Photo

It's a brutal, marathon "rap" session. Brutal for 15-year-old Bobby, standing in the hot sun behind an abandoned plastics factory with 50 other kids seated on the concrete apron around him.

They are blurs in his sight. His gut and mind are crawling for a puff of grass, a downer, an upper, a shot of smack — anything. And all these kids throwing it at him.

"Nobody cares a s— about you out there, Bobby!" a boy his own age shouts at him. "What's so cool out there? When are you going to start growing up, little boy?"

A girl on Bobby's other side gets up and screams right at him: "You afraid of the good life, Bobby? You afraid of making something of yourself? Look at me — I was like you. Got up off my a— and did something."

It's Bobby's day to face himself and his peers. He can't cop out. He can't con them all. All of them have been this route before him. They call it peer pressure.

Suddenly, Bobby's face softens. Tears run down his cheeks. He stammers how he is a failure, how nobody really loves him, how he hates himself.

"You wanna be loved, Bobby?" the first boy asks, but now the harsh tone is gone. The harsh four-letter words are gone. "I love you, Bobby. Everybody here loves you."

The kids shout in chorus: "Love ya, Bobby!" This is "The Seed" in action. When they use the word "love," they mean it. And that may be the subtle difference between the Seed and other forms of group therapy, many of which tend to rob the individual of dignity.

Love is the byword of the Seed, exchanged eye-to-eye between the kids. The Seed was founded by Art Barker, 47-year-old former nightclub comedian, and has one "professional," Sister Teresa Margaret.

Sister Teresa, assigned to the Seed by the Archdiocese of Miami, speaks with a Florida cracker twang but holds degrees in sociology and psychology.

A tall and handsome black boy has experienced his "three-day miracle" a month ago and stands for his turn at rap. "I just feel the love all around me," he says. "I want to keep it inside me. It is the greatest thing in this world today. People trying to go to the moon, but it's here."

Now they come to the old factory on the edge of the everglades at the age of 15 a day. The average age is 15. Two years ago it was 20.

They are "sentenced" to the Seed by the courts, parents and school deans. A few turn themselves in for they have learned on their own what the program teaches: "You have three alternatives to going straight — prison, insanity or

probation and parole officers joining in. A typical open meeting may include 120 members and 400 visitors.

In the two weeks of intense 12-hour-a-day rap sessions, the child lives in a foster home and is not permitted to see or speak to his parents. Then comes the twice-a-week "family nights."

The parents sit three hours in hard folding chairs to face their children across an open aisle. In turn, they exchange news and tears.

"We unit a family," Barker told the House Select Committee on Crime and Drug Abuse at a Miami hearing this year where a criminal court judge called his program "a

"And it lasts, it lasts forever."

The foster parents are the ones who have put their own kids through the program. So thankful for the results in their own lives, they do yeoman service hauling kids, tending files in the office, and cooking and hauling to the grounds as many as 700 meals a day.

If the member has not made adequate progress in two weeks, he continues the intensive sessions for two more weeks. If he has shown an improved attitude, he goes back to school, or job and returns home, attending a group session for three hours each night and all day Saturday.

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