

EX-COMEDIAN HELPING YOUNG ADDICTS

Founder Of 'The Seed' Claims Many Turned Off Drugs

(EDITOR'S NOTE: When a Congressional committee came to Florida this year to study drug abuse, it heard testimony that 30 per cent of teenagers may be on drugs. It also heard about a promising and unorthodox new program to combat drug abuse called "The Seed." Reporter Frank Edge went to study "The Seed," why it works and the former nightclub comedian who founded it. The following is the last of a three-part series.)

By FRANK EDGE
FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (UPI) -- 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.

Numbers Growing
"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 tail-gunner on a bomber. He also acquired an Air Corps lieutenant's bars, a taste for 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.

Was Lousy Parent

"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 "Brandy" 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" Is Born

"The Seed was born when Barbara died in my arms," Barker said. "She 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 honesty 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 pockets from The Seed, or that there is lack of proper medical, psychological and spiritual attention for his children.

Criticism "Garbage"

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."

Short, Nervous

Barker is short and nervous, with 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."

Parents Behind Him

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.

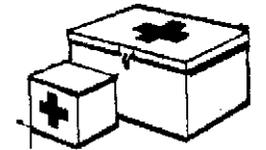
"I think that all human beings are born beautiful, idealistic, romantic and adventurous, and I think our society is sometimes working very hard to destroy that," Barker told the House Select Committee on Crime and Drug Abuse at a

hearing in Miami this year, where his young ex-addicts also testified.

"I think another man, Alfred Adler, said every man gets a second chance to become the person he was first meant to be," Barker said.

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