

Dec. 8, 1988

# Shopping network telethon plans taped segment by Bush

By BILL SHELTON  
Tribune Business Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Although president-elect George Bush won't be honking horns or trying to sell 700 mini-blind dusters, he will get top billing Christmas Eve on Home Shopping Network's first telethon, a fundraiser for a controversial drug-rehabilitation program based in St. Petersburg.

HSN, a large St. Petersburg broadcasting company that sells merchandise over live television, announced Wednesday that Bush will appear in a taped segment during a six-hour telethon to benefit Straight Inc., a nationwide get-tough program geared to help youngsters fight drug abuse.

Straight, founded by Mel and Betty Sembler of St. Petersburg, is a drug rehabilitation operation that specializes in rigid house rules and emotionally-charged group counseling sessions that critics often call brainwashing.

The program has been embroiled in controversy almost since opening in 1976, often because of criticism from former counselors and troubled youngsters who have charged that emotional and physical abuse was used in the program. The Sembaliers could not be reached for comment.

Mel Sembler, a shopping center developer in St. Petersburg, was a Florida co-chairman for Bush's finance committee during the president-elect's bid for the White House.

In October 1986, Straight gained national attention when a state appeals court determined that parents could commit their child to a drug rehabilitation program without the child's permission or a court order. The case was spurred by a claim from the state Depart-

ment of Health and Rehabilitative Services that only a judge or the child himself could authorize commitment in a drug program.

The telethon is scheduled to air on HSN channels from noon until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve. Officials with HSN said all donations would be given to the drug rehabilitation program, and the telethon would be available to be watched in about 50 million homes across the country.

"HSN will donate its communication facilities and cover all expenses to launch this telethon for the benefit of Straight," said Roy M. Speer, chief executive of HSN. "Also, HSN's employees will donate their time and effort."

Speer said in a news release that HSN chose Straight because one in 10 high school students has problems with drugs or alcohol, and Straight has been very successful treating these youngsters. "We plan that this event will become an annual Christmas tradition in the war on drugs."

HSN's network representatives will handle pledge calls for the telethon. A toll-free drug crisis line, staffed by Straight personnel, will be available to callers for immediate problem counseling. Crisis calls will continue to be answered in the St. Petersburg Straight offices when the telethon goes off the air at 6 p.m.

The Straight Holiday Telethon is being produced by Ken Yates, president of HSN Entertainment, a subsidiary of HSN. Yates was producer of the CBS special "We Are The World: A Year of Giving" and a veteran of broadcast specials for Kenny Rogers, Lionel Ritchie and Rich Little. Yates said President Reagan also has been invited to tape a message for the telethon, but no response has been received.