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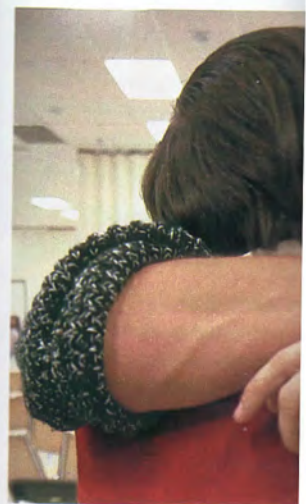


STRAIGHT

A Gloves-off Treatment Program

By CLIFF TARPY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SENIOR STAFF

Photographs by JOSÉ AZEL





WITH AN URGENCY born of emotional turmoil, young people flail their arms in hopes of being called on during a group therapy session in Stoughton, Massachusetts, near Boston. Their stories vary, but the 125 mostly middle-class youths share a common element: a chemical dependency that brought them to Straight, Inc., a private, no-nonsense drug rehabilitation program. At group sessions they tell of their anger toward their parents, the urge to run from responsibility, the pain of trying to share their emotions with others, and the difficulty of even admitting to having a drug problem.

Most of the youths were introduced to drugs by schoolmates or other friends, who often remained their chief suppliers. Designed for those in their early teens through early 20s, the state-licensed program isolates clients from outside influences during the initial treatment phase. A newcomer is prohibited from receiving mail or phone calls and must live with the family of another youth involved in a later stage of treatment. Some graduates stay on as paid "peer staff," assisting the professional staff of psychologists and drug-abuse counselors.

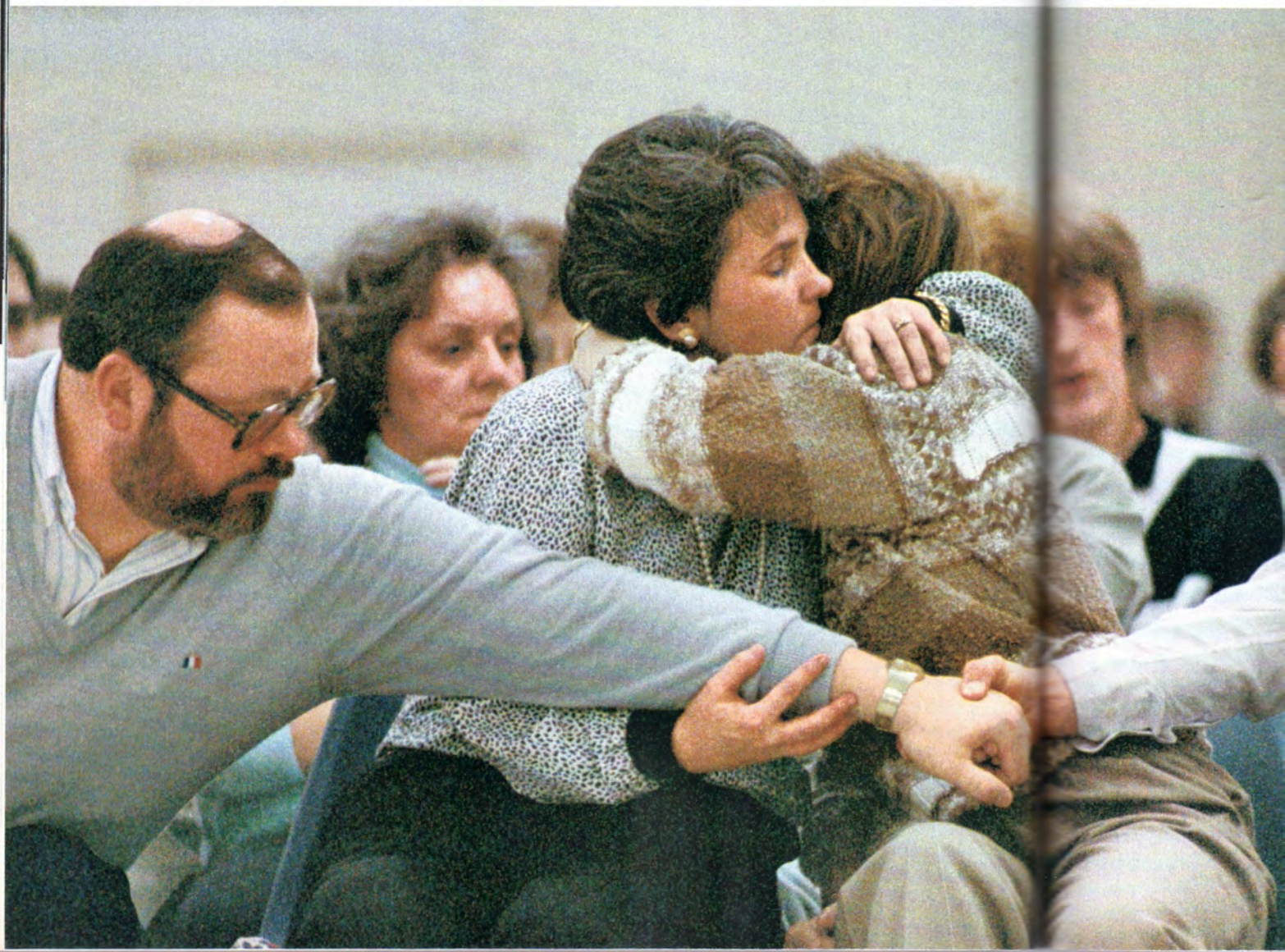
Straight views dependence on alcohol, cocaine, and other drugs as a family, rather than an individual, problem. Separate sessions for parents are held on the theme of chemical dependency as a "family disease." Joint meetings between youths and parents often result in emotional reconciliations (left).

Since 1984 the percentage of Straight's clients admitting to cocaine use has risen from about 25 to more than 75 percent. Cocaine is also a major factor in the 111 percent increase in admissions to state-supported treatment facilities in the U. S. during the past two years.

T

Program







SHARING THE PAIN of having a troubled child, couples comfort each other at a Stoughton counseling session (below left). Such mutual concern helped create Straight in 1976 when parents in St. Petersburg, Florida, saw a need for a program designed for adolescents. Today the program serves 850 clients in seven cities.

Parents see their children only at Straight headquarters during the first treatment phase, which usually lasts 65 to 75 days. During that period the newcomers must remain free of drugs, behave properly, and demonstrate a positive attitude. They may then resume living at home and, as "oldcomers," enter the next rehabilitation stage. Treatment usually takes about a year and costs more than \$11,000.

To discourage attempts to flee, oldcomers accompany newcomers within the building, often holding on to their belts (above, far left). Staff members and clients restrain a girl who became unruly (above left). Straight's practices have been criticized as overly harsh and authoritarian. In 1983 a 20-year-old Virginia youth who insisted he had no drug problem claimed he had been tricked into entering and then prevented from leaving Straight facilities in St. Petersburg and in Springfield, Virginia. He successfully sued Straight for false imprisonment. Since then, Straight says, it has used more caution in custody matters. While clients 18 and older may leave at will, the release of a minor still requires the consent of a parent or legal guardian.

Drug-abuse experts stress that Straight's confrontational, group-oriented approach may be unsuitable for some youths. They urge care in choosing among the many treatment programs available. □