

## Girl Sues Straight Inc. After Jump Off Balcony

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She was a cheerleader, a pretty 13-year-old who should have been having the time of her life. But the young St. Petersburg teenager smoked pot, snorted cocaine, popped "uppers" and "downers" and swilled beer.

By late spring of 1978, she skipped school regularly. She ran away from home a half-dozen times and was placed in the Pinellas County Juvenile Detention Center four times.

When she vomited blood and had stomach pains, she got scared. She was being held by juvenile court officials for violation of probation when she was admitted to Straight Inc., a St. Petersburg agency that tries to wean young addicts from drugs. She was sent by Straight to live in an apartment with a man whose daughter also was a Straight client.

Two weeks later she jumped off the fourth-floor balcony of the Tampa apartment building where she was living and was badly injured. She spent eight weeks in a hospital, where doctors inserted steel rods in her back because of fractured vertebrae, nine more weeks in a full body cast and then in a brace.

Her body is scarred from surgery and she will need more operations. She is embarrassed to wear a bathing suit because the metal rods in her back bump up under her skin when she bends over. There's still a lot of pain, she complains.

That is the story that unfolds in three thick Circuit Court files. The girl, who is now 15, and her parents are suing Straight Inc., the man who was caring for the girl at the Tampa apartment where the accident happened and an insurance company that represents Straight.

Straight and the man at whose apartment the girl was staying claim they weren't negligent — that the girl caused her own injuries. Straight has also has counter-sued the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), saying that agency licenses the drug treatment program. If Straight was negligent, HRS must take responsibility or, at least, share the blame, an attorney for Straight is arguing.

Pinellas Circuit Judge Michael Athanason will be asked today to issue a summary judgment, dismissing the unusual lawsuit against Straight. If the suit isn't dismissed, the case is expected to be set for trial and a jury will decide just who caused the girl's injuries.

In statements in the court file, the girl admitted she went into the Straight program without complaint. However, her parents say they placed the girl in the program with the understanding that there was a court order requiring them to do so.

It didn't take long for things to start going wrong. The girl said she was assigned by Straight to live with the Tampa man and his daughter but that she didn't like them. She said they argued a lot and criticized her. The other girl was several years older and also a client of Straight. The older girl would tell the younger girl she was "no good" and make nasty comments about a daily diary she was told to keep, the girl said.

Neither did the girl like the night meetings at Straight when parents would attend group meetings, she said.

"They (her parents) would stand up (in front of a mass gathering of parents and Straight clients) and talk and they told me how my brothers and sisters were and how they were doing and they hoped I was doing okay," the girl stated.

"At first I really — I couldn't talk, and, you know, I started crying and stuff. And the lady (a Straight official) took me into her office and she told me I had to get up there and talk.

"And, um, they wanted me to stand up there in front of all the people and, um, tell them about things, drugs and things that I have done, why I was there."

The girl claims she was locked in a room by herself "from 9 to 9" one day when she refused to take part in a discussion. She also claims that another girl in the program tried to grab her breast when she was in a bathroom. When she complained about the incident, she said she was told she was lying.

Although Straight officials deny it, the girl claims she asked several times to be allowed to go home.

The night before she jumped off the balcony, she said she was in the Tampa apartment. She said the girl and her father were arguing in another room.

"I wanted to go home," the girl said. She said she opened the sliding glass doors that led onto a balcony and stepped outside. She said she stood on the balcony for about an hour. The sun was just coming up.

"I stood there and was thinking, then I jumped," she said.

She said she landed on her feet and fell down. "I couldn't get my breath and I just prayed that I could live," she said, adding that when she tried to get up, "that's when my back really hurt."

Straight, which has admitted more than 800 area youngsters into its programs since it opened in 1976, is licensed by HRS. Youngsters often are referred to the program by juvenile court officials.

In addition to denying any negligence, Straight is claiming that HRS had jurisdiction over the girl and had "tried unsuccessfully to alter her delinquent and self-destructive behavior" prior to the time she was admitted to Straight.

It was HRS, not Straight, that represented to the girl's parents that there was a court order placing the girl in Straight, according to a motion filed by Straight in February.

The man from whose balcony the girl jumped said he never tried to keep the girl from leaving, never refused to let her talk to her parents and that she never asked to be allowed to talk to her parents. There was nothing to keep the girl from leaving his apartment by the door, he added, saying it could not be locked from the inside.