

MID-PINELLAS EDITION

Evening Independent

St. Petersburg, Florida

15 Cents A Copy

Wednesday, July 28, 1982

Inside STRAIGHT The Process



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Straight Inc. is a nonprofit drug rehabilitation program for the young drug user and his family that was born seven years ago and reared in the backyard of St. Petersburg, with the growing pains of criticism leveled at its approach. According to the program's figures, some 58 percent of all young people who have graduated from the program remain drug-free. Through Thursday, the Evening Independent is attempting to take you "Inside Straight."

In part one, Evening Independent staff writer Bettinita Harris introduced you to young people and their pasts; Tuesday, the focus was on the program and its staff members. Today we look at the confrontations involved in the process, with Thursday devoted to another visit with the young people you met Monday.

the business of helping young people return to values they gave up under the influence of drugs.

"They are returned to the mainstream values of their family, their church, their synagogue, their country. It's a process of helping and permitting young people to return where they would really like to be, where they feel good about themselves and their values."

When a young person enters the program, his body and his belongings are thoroughly searched for drugs. He is told he cannot have money or identification. He cannot make or receive telephone calls or letters. He cannot read, watch television or listen to the radio.

He cannot go outside, except to and from the car. Everywhere he goes, he is literally carried around by his belts loops to let him know he is not trusted and the body contact lets him know someone cares.

He gradually earns his rights back by working on himself and changing those personal characteristics that caused him to hurt himself and the people around him.

Newton says there are people who have problems with the

About 6 p.m. every Monday and Friday, cars begin to fill the parking lot that encircles an unmarked building at 3001 Gandy Blvd.

The building is gold and its solid, concrete walls sit in the midst of wilderness.

Children and adults scurry out of their cars carrying small pillows and fans. A few congregate in the parking lot, but most enter the building, sign in and go directly to a medium-sized room where refreshments are sold.

When 6:30 draws near, the people file into an already crowded auditorium-type room. Big, bland, beige.

Young people sit on the far side of the room; boys on one side, girls on the other.

The crowd files into row after row of blue chairs; girls' parents on one side, boys' on the other.

And the open meeting of Straight Inc. is called to order.

Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight National and program director of Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg, talks briefly about the program for the benefit of visitors.

He ends the introduction with, "What we're essentially going to do tonight is bare our souls to you. In return, we ask that what is said here, what is done here, stays here."

And with those words, the baring of

difficult to determine who her parents are. Somewhere along the line, everyone in this room has been her parent. As one visiting parent put it, "Between sobs, I listened to the girls talk. Every one was my Terri."

When the newcomers finish, an oldcomer takes the microphone. He talks a little about his past, but mostly he talks about where he is now and the changes he is making; how he's rebuilding his family relationship, how he's planning to attend college in the fall, how he looks forward to tomorrow.

The crowd applauds. This is the celebration of life and its extremes—what is and what can be.

The mike begins a three-hour journey into the audience, passed from one person to another.

Some parents merely say, "I love you, Joanne" or "I love you, Carey." Those youngsters have either earned talking privileges and will visit with their parents after the meeting or they have earned second phase or higher and are living at home. For parents whose children are program newcomers, this is their only opportunity to see and talk to their children.

A middle-aged couple takes the mike. Mary, their daughter, stands across the room—arms at her side, eyes directly on her parents.

Her mother says: "I'm angry. I'm angry about the way you stole those checks out of my purse and forged my name on them because our family has

graduating from high school tonight and we can't be with her tonight. Here we are, sitting in a drug rehab because of you. It's not fair to your sister and I am p-----d off about that."

"You've been here for 45 days and you haven't moved," his mother says. "We're sick and tired of coming here every Monday and Friday night and seeing you sit on your a--. We're working on our program and we're getting strong for you to come home. I love you, Michael."

"I love you, mom. I love you, dad."

"Love you, Michael," the group says.

Carolyn stands, as do her parents. "Carolyn, I went to your room today. And you know what?

Everything is in its place except for one thing—you. We want you to come home, but only you can make it possible. I love you, Carolyn."

"I love you, mom."

"Carolyn, like your mother said, we're just waiting for the day that you come home and we can start building a family relationship. I love you."

"Love you, dad."

"Love you, Carolyn."

The hour is late and parent rape are scheduled after the meeting. But no one in the audience speaks of the hour's lateness, no one thinks about leaving early. The mike is passed on.

Before his parents can say, "I love you, Charles," he yells, "Coming home" and runs across into the open arms of his parents.

you, Charles," he yells, "Coming home" and runs across into the open arms of his parents.

"This is what we've been working for," his mother says. "It's not going to be easy, but we're getting stronger every day. I love you, Charles."

"I love you, mom."

"Son, I'm so happy for you. I know you've worked hard and I'm proud of you. We're looking forward to you coming home. Love you, Charles."

"Love you, dad."

"Love you, Charles."

The crowd applauds. This is the celebration of life and its extremes—what is and what can be.

On page 2-b, staff writer Bettinita Harris takes you to a parent rap session and explores daytime hours at Straight.

devoted to another visit with the young people you met Monday.

For the most part, the control is gone. Parents have lost control.

The chemically dependent child has lost control.

And yet, the life of the family centers on the disruption the chemically dependent child has caused.

"I saw my son in a big pool and he was going down for the third time. I had my hand reaching out to him, but he wouldn't take it," says one mother.

A father says, "It's like being trapped and watching your kid drown."

Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight National and program director of Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg, says Straight is in

him.

Newton says there are people who have problems with the Straight program because it holds the Silver Cord firmly.

"Adolescence is a period of experimentation, of pushing limits. But it's only safe for young people to go through that period of growing up if adults remain in charge and stop youngsters short of destroying themselves, short of having to take the lethal consequences of their own bad decisions.

"We believe in the concept of adults being in charge. I don't have any regrets about our position.

"I believe our position is the one that is safest for youngsters, where adults literally are the safety net while young people swing on the trapeze of growing up."

what is done here, stays here."

And with those words, the baring of souls begins. One by one, young people who have been in the program three to 14 days stand, before the staff, before their peers, before their parents and tell their stories.

"My name is . . . I am -- years old . . . The drugs I've taken are . . . I've been in the program for . . . I am a drugie. In my past . . ."

They talk about their drug use. They tell stories about stealing and getting arrested. Stories about lying and cheating. Stories about using and being used. Stories that would make any mother, any father cry.

And they do cry. As a young girl shares intimate details of a twisted lifestyle, it isn't

angry about the way you stole those checks out of my purse and forged my name on them because our family has to go without the things we want so that we can pay that money back. There's no place for you to go. Because you're not going back home until you're straight."

She hands the mike to her husband and slumps into his arms.

"Look at what you've done to your mother. It hurts me to see what you've done to her," Mary's father says and passes the mike.

Mary, still standing, sobs, "I love you, mom. I love you, dad."

To show their support, Mary's peers say, "Love you, Mary."

Another couple stands. Their son Michael stands.

His father begins: "Your sister is