

'In the middle of a nightmare'

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It's not easy to watch Samantha Monroe tell her story.

First, she looks directly at you, her blue eyes brimming with tears, a pair of vertical frown lines etched between her eyebrows. There's anger in her voice. A lot of four-letter words.

When she gets to the most painful memories, Monroe looks down at the table, pulls her long platinum hair out of a ponytail and runs her fingers through it, repeatedly. "I need a cigarette," she mumbles.

She's sitting in a busy cafeteria, but she doesn't seem to care if people see her crying or overhear the awful experiences she's describing. She wants to talk about what happened to her 20 years ago. She needs to.

"I was a 13-year-old kid," she says, "in the middle of a nightmare."

Monroe is 34 now, and she's still having it.

They will gather this weekend in a downtown St. Petersburg hotel, a group of people concerned about the dangers they see in adolescent treatment programs - drug addiction centers, wilderness "boot camps" and residential workshops for children with eating disorders, behavioral problems or mental disabilities.

Some of these programs actually hurt the kids they claim to be helping, their critics say. The programs' methods are said to be akin to brainwashing. They can involve sleep or food deprivation, lack of privacy and verbal confrontations designed to break down a person's resistance. Kids are restrained with excessive force, subjected to humiliating experiences and isolated from their parents, homes and friends, according to critics.

Arnold Trebach, professor emeritus of law and justice at American University in Washington, D.C., and a longtime critic of some treatment programs, organized the St. Petersburg conference, the second annual. He even coined a phrase for its subject: "treatment abuse."

Although most of these programs are well-intentioned, Trebach contends that too many have caused long-lasting physical and mental damage to children - especially the programs spawned by the antidrug fervor of the 1970s and '80s. Children who attended those programs are now adults. Some of them are ready to share their stories. So the conference will also serve as a self-described reunion of survivors.

Most of the attendees will be veterans of Straight Inc., the Pinellas County-based drug program that gained national notoriety in the 1980s. It was cofounded by St. Petersburg businessmen Joseph Zappala and Mel Sembler and attracted the approval of former President George Bush, Nancy Reagan and Princess Diana. Thousands of youngsters reportedly kicked drug addictions at Straight facilities around the country.

But the organization's methods also attracted criticism, investigations and lawsuits. Several former clients sued Straight, claiming they were abused or held against their will.

Straight officials persistently denied that any abuse happened. They also changed some of their more controversial methods, such as having clients sit on other clients to restrain them. They maintained that Straight was effective, saying that two-thirds of the children who completed long-term therapy remained drug-free for at least two years.

Still, there were six-figure settlements. Enrollment in Straight dropped. One by one, its treatment facilities closed. By mid 1993 Straight was out of business.

The bad memories will never end for Samantha Monroe, though. This weekend she'll talk about them at the St. Petersburg conference.

This is what she says happened to her:

It was 1980. Monroe, 13, was a bright girl from a troubled home that had been visited by state child-welfare officers. She was in sixth grade. She never did drugs, she says.

One day a boy brought minibottles of liquor to school, the kind sold on airline flights. Monroe got one, but when she was called to the principal's office, she flushed it down the toilet.

A detective investigating drug activity at the school told Monroe's mother that Samantha probably was doing drugs, that it was a fluke they had found her clean. He suggested Straight.

About a month later, Monroe got in the car with her mother and stepfather. She thought they were going to buy a plane ticket for her to visit her father in New Jersey. Instead they drove to a large warehouselike building in Sarasota.

Monroe was led into one room, her parents into another. Two girls, already enrolled in Straight, sat Monroe in a chair and told her they knew she was a "druggie," so they wanted her to confess.

She refused, they insisted, she refused. This went on for hours. Monroe was not allowed to get out of the chair. She couldn't go to the bathroom or get a drink of water.

By evening, desperate to escape the room, Monroe broke.

"I told them I did pot, heroin, acid, PCP, LSD, cocaine. I told them I huffed, I smoked banana peels. Everything they wanted to hear."

The girls hugged Monroe, said they loved her and told her to stand up.

"They made me strip naked, bend over and hold my ankles," Monroe says.

After a body-cavity search, they gave Monroe someone else's clothes and led her into a large adjoining room where dozens of other children were seated in rows of plastic chairs.

It was the beginning of a 22-month battle.

Some adolescents accepted Straight's regimen of daily "raps" - hours-long group sessions where clients frantically waved their hands in the air, sang songs in unison and spoke about highly personal subjects such as their sexual fantasies. Some didn't balk at writing daily "moral inventories" or going each night to sleep at a different "host home," the home of a child further along in the program.

Monroe balked - at everything. And she paid for it.

"I got slapped, I got sat on, I got spit on," she says. "Can you imagine being flat on the floor, with one person sitting on one of your legs, another person on your other leg, a person on one of your arms, a person on the other arm and a 200-pound girl sitting on your chest, eating her lunch?"

Several weeks into the program, she ran away. Straight staffers found her sleeping at a friend's house and brought her back, against her will.

She ran again, hitchhiking to California. She got arrested for prostitution and went to juvenile detention. In exchange for immunity, she gave investigators information about other prostitutes. The state of California put her on a plane for Miami, where her mother was living. Monroe thought she was headed for freedom.

Instead, when she walked off the plane, she was greeted by her parents, her sister, and two Straight clients and their parents. She tried to run but they tackled her on the carpet.

"I was screaming, 'Help me! Help me!' but they just carried me out of the airport and no one did a thing," Monroe says.

She rode from Miami to Sarasota, hog-tied in the back of a van.

At Straight, she was taken directly to a windowless, bare closet called the "time-out room."

"I was in there for 14 days," Monroe says. "I had no shower, no trips to the bathroom. They brought me biscuits and water. Anybody who tried to touch me, I fought. I bit the inside of my mouth and would spit blood at them. I took off my shirt and used it as a weapon."

Periodically, other clients were sent into the time-out room to "motivate" Monroe: yell at her, tell her what a failure she was, how she had ruined her life.

Monroe had no choice but to soil her pants with urine, feces and menstrual blood. She says Straight staffers called this punishment "humble pants." The room reeked, she recalls.

Finally one night, as parents and children held a meeting in the next room, Monroe heard her own mother pleading with her through a microphone to "be a good girl." She decided to cooperate.

Two parent volunteers gave her a bucket of water and a clean pair of underpants, then allowed her to go in another room to wash. She says they didn't seem shocked by her appearance.

"I had a busted lip and a black eye," she says. "The skin was peeling off my hands, I guess from malnutrition. My hair was falling out. I had bitten one finger each day, to mark the passage of time."

That night, a male Straight staffer came into her time-out room after the evening's program had ended and everyone had gone home. As she tells what happened next, Monroe's voice quivers.

"He said, 'I can make it easier on you if you do what I tell you to do.' Then he unzipped his pants. So I took my pants off, too."

That was Monroe's ticket out of the closet. But it started a whole new nightmare for her. She says the staffer continued to demand sexual acts several times a week, seeking her out usually in the kitchen, where she had earned the privilege of working.

"He'd walk in and say, 'Where's my pretty little girl?' I thought I had to do it. I thought everybody who had privileges was doing it."

A month shy of her 15th birthday, Monroe discovered she was pregnant. And that, finally, got her out of Straight.

"They brought me to the girls' rap room and they said, 'You're free to go.' "

Monroe had an abortion, paid for, she says, by the state. She claims she wasn't the only Straight client who was sexually abused.

"How did girls get herpes on their mouths? How did boys wind up with anal tears? There were yeast infections, urinary tract infections."

For the next few years, she bounced from foster homes to psychiatric hospitals to boyfriends' apartments. She had another abortion. She worked as a stripper, a nanny, a sous chef. She earned her GED and completed a training program to be a certified nursing assistant. She tried, and quit, college. She was arrested for shoplifting. She spent four years in France.

Today she works as a travel agent. She feels more in control. The days of frantic calls to suicide hotlines are over. "Therapy," she says, "has deemed me sane. Maybe a little turmoiled. But sane."

Her story, says Richard Bradbury, is not far-fetched. It's typical of what many children experienced in Straight, according to Bradbury, a former Straight client who successfully completed the program in 1984, became a staffer and then spent the next eight years campaigning to destroy the organization. He picketed Straight offices, helped shelter Straight runaways and pestered media and state officials to investigate the program.

"It was pure child abuse. Torture," says Bradbury, now 36 and living in Tampa.

Bradbury claims he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. He hasn't married or had children and says he blames Straight for that. He's self-employed, he says, because, "I have to take things at my own speed."

Chris Tyler, 40, of Palm Harbor, is another disillusioned Straight graduate. Like Bradbury, he said he barely experimented with marijuana and beer before his parents checked him into Straight when he was 16. He remembers the strip search and being led around by other clients hanging onto his belt loops.

"We were sitting on hard wooden benches 12, 14 hours a day," says Tyler. "If you didn't sit up the whole time, you had the knuckles of the guy behind you in your spine."

Like Monroe, Tyler ran away from the program but was returned when several Straight staffers saw him walking along Gulf-to-Bay Boulevard in Clearwater.

Tyler says the worst thing about Straight was that it encouraged teenagers to turn on each other.

"It was 99 percent run by kids who had no training. Kids running kids. Like Lord of the Flies."

Tyler, who now runs his own manufacturing and design business, is divorced and has two children. He says he's a workaholic, driven to succeed, he thinks, by the anger he still feels toward Straight.

"I was really taken advantage of as a child. It robbed me of my innocence, of just being 16 and going around with my friends and having fun."

Tyler and Bradbury both plan to be at this weekend's conference. They're particularly interested in Sunday's sessions focusing on possible legal action participants can take.

"I want to sue somebody," Tyler says. "I want to go after those people."

The problem, of course, is that Straight no longer exists. In 1996, three years after Straight shut down, its corporate name was changed to Drug Free America Foundation. That organization, based in a downtown St. Petersburg office, does drug prevention education but no

treatment, said director of communications Katherine Ford. Advisory board members include Gov. Jeb Bush, his wife, Columba, and St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Baker.

"We get lots of hate mail from people who think we are Straight," Ford said. "But none of us were involved with or employed by Straight."

However, there is one link: Betty Sembler, wife of Straight co-founder Mel Sembler, is chairwoman of the board of directors of Drug Free America Foundation.

Former Straight staffers are reluctant to revisit the past. Miller Newton, Straight's former national clinical director, was reached Monday at his home in Madeira Beach but would not comment.

One man who worked there for five years before moving on to other drug treatment centers in the Tampa Bay area said he had a positive experience working at Straight, but he did not want to be identified in this story.

Recently, Samantha Monroe went with Bradbury and Tyler to visit the building in Sarasota where she spent nearly two years in Straight. It's now a construction warehouse on Cattlemen Road.

Monroe walked inside and burst into tears.

"I was a lost kid in there," she said. "And I want someone to tell me why."

The Trebach Institute's Second International Conference on Adolescent Treatment Abuse and Reunion of Straight Survivors begins today with a 6 p.m. reception at Mattison's, 111 Second Ave. NE, St. Petersburg. Saturday and Sunday sessions are from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and take place at Julian's at the Heritage Hotel, 256 Second St. N. Admission is \$100, \$35 for students. Some scholarships are available. More information is available at <http://www.trebach.org/abuse> or by calling toll-free 1-888-883-5685.

• **Caption:** PHOTO, PATTY YABLONSKI Richard Bradbury, Samantha Monroe and Chris Tyler sit together

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