

Drug center wins respite in court, but the heated debate continues

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STRAIGHT Inc., a drug rehabilitation center for teenagers in Marietta, won a respite in its first court appearance last week, but questions raised about the center's treatment methods persist.

The American Civil Liberties Union, acting on the complaints of a former STRAIGHT member, accused the organization of holding five teenagers against their wills at the center.

ACLU and STRAIGHT agreed Thursday to name an independent committee to "confirm the adequacy of the admission, treatment and discharge procedures utilized in the program."

While the question has been temporarily resolved in court, the controversy over STRAIGHT's treatment program continues among some observers.

Seventeen-year-old Davis, the son of a Dumwoody lawyer, spent 13 months at the center.

While he credited the program with making him "straight" — getting him off drugs — Davis charged that STRAIGHT violates the civil rights of the teenagers it treats.

"No matter what comes of the hearings, I won't give up until something's done," he said. "There are other avenues to pursue."

The names of the five teenagers that ACLU went to court to free were supplied by Davis. He told ACLU lawyers that the five were his friends and that he knew they wanted to get out of the program.

The criticism by Davis, the ACLU and others has drawn a fiercely protective response from STRAIGHT supporters, many of whom credit the organization with saving their children's lives.

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you care," one parent said. "I care enough to do anything."

Tides of raw emotion are visible at the group's "open meetings," at which parents and children pass a microphone and describe their experiences in the program to an assembly of some 350 parents and relatives.

At one such meeting, attended by a Journal-Constitution reporter, a boy stood and simply told his family he loved them — a landmark occurrence in a home split by alcohol and drug use.

A delicate blond girl, her innocent face belying her words, talked about her experiments with pills, marijuana, LSD and speed.

"I had to put on this real independent image," others said, or "I couldn't lower my pride and reach out. I was looking for someone to care."

Sometimes there are sobbs. Or there is anger, as when a parent publicly scolded his son for backsliding.

"I feel really disappointed that you have wasted the past four months," the parent said.

"There isn't a lot of time to waste."

STRAIGHT's five-phase program lets members "earn" back the privileges of living with their families and attending school, while they learn to do without drugs.

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Davis, the former member, said other restrictions include keeping teenagers sitting in chairs for long stretches with few bathroom breaks and "jumping on them" or physically abusing them if they talk out of turn.

STRAIGHT officials deny any of its members are abused.

During the first phase, the "newcomers" are not permitted to call or contact their parents unless they have "earned talk privileges."

They live with "foster" families, the parents of a more experienced member; and their comings and goings, even their meal-times, are dictated by the "oldcomer."

They may not attend school or hold a job until the staff is satisfied with their progress, whether it takes weeks or months.

The teenagers spend hours a day in "rap sessions," resembling encounter groups, in which the

peer pressure mentioned by STRAIGHT proponents is brought into play.

"We say, 'If peer pressure can get them into drugs, peer pressure can get them out,'" STRAIGHT Director Dave Tilley said.

Some believe the tough regimen creates an atmosphere of mutual responsibility and concern. Others, like Davis, call it "child abuse" and "brainwashing."

A simple transgression can put an advanced member back into "first phase."

"Once my dad asked me if I wanted out," Davis said. "I thought he was just trying to trick me so I'd get in trouble and go back to phase one."

"So I told him no."

Davis said many teens enter the STRAIGHT center unwillingly and that some are tricked into entering with false commitment papers.

Director Tilley canceled an interview with The Journal-Constitution at the STRAIGHT center Friday morning.

Tilley said he did not want to discuss the program's current status.

"We have one of the most open-door drug programs in the country," he said. "But we're dealing with sick kids, chemically dependent kids."

Tilley said publicity generated by the ACLU's court action had been harmful to the teens enrolled in the program, adding that he was concerned, "not for my protection, but for the protection of the kids. The needs of my 140 kids have to come first."

"I want the issue resolved, and I feel that what is happening is a possible good resolve to the situation."

Further court action has been postponed, pending the formation of the independent study committee and STRAIGHT's licensing by the state Department of Human Resources.