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PATHWAY FAMILY CENTER TRUTH

(https://web.archive.org/web/20110618081924/mailto:rmonaghan@nwitimes.com)

VALPARAISO | Rose Gagen said she was appealing to the court of last resort when she had her daughter arrested on drug charges so she could get court-ordered therapy for the troubled teen.

Nine months and a lawsuit later, Gagen said

teen drug treatment program in Indianapolis.

The treatment they received left them in worse psychological health than before they went in, they said. Pathway told them insurance would cover most of the bill, but they are still paying off thousands of dollars. The agency took them to court to collect the money.

As last summer's news that Porter County ranks among the top 10 places for heroin-related deaths nationwide seeped into the community consciousness, local leaders searched for solutions.

In the fall, a push to bring a Valparaiso branch of Pathway was announced when leaders in the Porter County drug enforcement circles brought the teen treatment center's case to elected officials.

After five years of holding charity benefit walks to raise $100,000 of the money Pathway Family Center says it needs for startup costs, the Community Action Drug Coalition sent leader Bob Tayor, who heads the county drug task force, to the County Council with a pitch for another $200,000 to get the local center up and running.

Within less than three months, Terri Nissley, CEO of Pathway in Indianapolis, announced plans to open a center by this fall.

Pathway, which treats adolescents 13 to 18, is one of the prime targets of the International Survivors Action Committee, a watchdog organization that exposes abuse in juvenile facilities. One of the organizations instrumental in publicizing the deaths of several Florida children who died in treatment, which made national news broadcasts over the past few years, ISAC staged protests at the Pathway Family Center in Milford and in nearby Columbus, Ohio, in 2006.

They hired a lawyer to initiate a lawsuit for abuse, but $3,000 into the case and still deeply in debt to Pathway, they ran out of money, Ed Gagen said.

Past Lives

"We were horrified to hear Pathway is perpetuating its terror tactics on teens in Valparaiso," Maia Szalavitz said, when she heard about the momentum for a Valparaiso Pathway Family Center.

Szalavitz has evolved as a nationally recognized spokesperson for treatment abuse, contributing to the New York Times, The Washington Post, Elle, Newsweek, Redbook and also appearing on Oprah, CNN, MSNBC and National Public Radio.

In a month-long investigation, The Times uncovered a list of nearly 90 lawsuits brought against Straight Inc. and its many offshoot organizations from 1977 to 2003. Lulu Corter in 2003 won a $6.5 million suit, and Rebecca Erlich in 1999 won $4.5 million in child abuse settlements from former Straight and KIDS, run by New Jersey clinical director Miller Newton. They had personal and behavioral problems, they said, but never did drugs. Corter went into treatment for wearing a leather skirt and was in Straight for 13 years, from age 13 to 26. Erlich went on to write a book, "Resurrection and Redemption."

There are many parents who swear Pathway and programs like it have saved their children's lives. Julie and Gus Brown, of Chesterton, and Mike Pendergast, of Valparaiso, are among them. Brown's two teens both are Pathway graduates.

For them, not talking to their sons during the early stages of treatment helped break unhealthy family cycles like co-dependence, manipulation and guilt games, they said. Pathway "gave them their life back," Julie Brown said.

Pendergast and his wife finished the year-long therapy regimen even after their daughter dropped out when she turned 18.

"I can't say enough good things about it," Pendergast said.

The Times received e-mails from Bea McNally, who said she has mixed emotions about her time in the Southfield, Mich., Pathway Center.

Straight to Pathway

Pathway isn't Straight, Terri Nissley insists. It is based on a similar model, she said, but has evolved into something different. Clients are well-treated, Nissley said. The program has abandoned belt-looping or arm locking, which put new clients in constant physical restraint by a peer in later phases of the program. Now, there is a rule completely forbidding physical contact. Adolescents have privacy in bathrooms and are not forced to walk outside in cold weather without shoes, as some former clients and parents have reported, Nissley said.

But a child may be in the program six weeks before a Ph.D. level psychologist evaluates them. A therapist with a master's degree is in the facility all week, and clients meet with them weekly. Teachers and a nurse

"There are a group of people out there who are convinced we are Straight incarnate," Nissley said, referring to ISAC. "They're a bunch of wackos who want to legalize drugs."

Nissley's daughter Jenni went through a program in Plymouth, Mich., that closed amid money problems the night that Jenni graduated. Nissley and some of the parents resolved to create a program for 13 other children still in treatment, Nissley told the Detroit Free Press in 2002.

What program was that?

In a letter to the Michigan Department of Social Services Division of Child Welfare Licensing, dated Aug. 23, 1994, David Key, who then was clinical director of Pathway's Michigan director, writes

Straight drowned in a flood of lawsuits, closing its last branch in Atlanta in 1993. But the Straight model survived, with similar facilities resurfacing under new names like Straight KIDS, Kids Helping Kids, Growing Together, and Pathway Family Center.

"Kids Helping Kids, a Pathway Family Center" appears on the Web site for its Milford, Ohio facility.

Kinder, gentler?

"Pathway Family Center has served dozens of families from Porter County and surrounding areas who have graduated from our program. Their strong support of expanding our successful program in Valparaiso certainly refutes the claims of this group," Nissley writes in an open letter to Porter County officials.

Nissley points to the agency's accreditation by the Council on Accreditation for Child and Family Services (COA) and licensing agencies in Michigan and Indiana.

Straight Inc. is a product of the Reagan Era War on Drugs. It sprouted from a Synanon-based drug addiction program, The Seed, which saw its funding dry up when a congressional probe revealed it used cult-like brainwashing strategies. But the highly confrontational model of peer-delivered therapy found a friend in Ohio Republican operators Mel and Betty Sembler, longtime Bush family friends who for decades pulled the strings of American drug policy from seats on "almost every major domestic anti-drug program," according to a 2002 Fox News broadcast chronicling Straight's abuses

Backtracking the Pathway
SYNANON CHURCH, founded 1970 by Chuch Dederich
The method of using addicts to aid in their own recovery by shouting indictments at one another was invented by Chuch Dederich in 1958 at Synanon, a church in California. Dederich called the method "synanons."

THE SEED CHAIN, founded June 1970, by Art Barker
The Seed was one of the first Synanons for kids only. It was founded by Art Barker in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. in 1970. MEL SEMBLER established The Seed, in St. Petersburg, Fla. The Seed closed in 1974, when the U.S. Senate likened its methods to North Korean brainwashing.

STRAIGHT, Inc. Chain,
Founded by MEL SEMBLER and Joe Zappala, 1976
After the The Seed lost support, Florida businessman MEL SEMBLER patterned a new program called Straight, Inc.after The Seed.

From 1976 to 1994, Straight was the biggest chain of juvenile drug rehab programs in the world. Straight closed in 1994 because of lawsuits and criminal investigations.
Straight St. Petersburg, Fla. Staff: MILLER NEWTON, HELEN GOWANNY
Straight, Cincinatti
Straight, Detroit, HELEN GOWANNY
Straight, Atlanta, Marietta, Ga., KATHLEEN CONE

KIDS CHAIN, MILLER NEWTON
KIDS of Newton County. MILLER NEWTON, 1984
KIDS of North Jersey, MILLER NEWTON, 1984

SECOND GENERATION
Pathway Family Center, Detroit - founded 1993 by HELEN GOWANNY, 15 miles from the old Straight facility near Detroit
Phoenix Adolescent Institute, Marietta, Ga. - founded in 1993 by KATHLEEN CONE, five miles from the Straight facility in Marietta.
Pathway Family Center, Indianapolis - founded 1993 by former Straight parent Terri Nissley
Kids Helping Kids, A Pathway Family Center, Cincinnati, - Penny Walker

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