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## Survivors of Straight, Inc.: An Interview with Marcus Chatfield

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### Introduction

Harm in the name of help has a long history within the annals of addiction treatment in the United States: prolonged institutionalization, lethal detoxification protocol, mandatory sterilization, indiscriminate electro- and chemo-convulsive therapies, prefrontal lobotomies, and drug insults of unending varieties, including treating morphine addiction with pounds of prescribed cocaine. But one of the lasting lessons of this history is that it is very hard to see such injuries within one's own era. In a series of papers with such distinguished co-authors as Dr. William Miller and Dr. Herbert Kleber, I have tried to explore this phenomenon of iatrogenic illness—treatment-caused harm or injury.

In 2006, Maia Szalavitz's *Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids* exposed the darker

side of addiction treatment for adolescents, but the voices of those who survived such abusive treatment have yet to have their voices fully heard by those who provided and supported such treatment and by the public and policy makers. Over the years, I have received communications from a number of those who as teenagers were treated in these so-called "tough love" organizations. Two of the most notorious of these were The Seed, Inc. and Straight, Inc.—lauded by the media only to later be exposed for a wide spectrum of abuses. Currently, the advocacy organization Survivors of Straight, Inc. is ensuring that we as a culture do not forget the potential for harm in the name of help in our efforts to address alcohol and other drug problems among young people.

There are those in the mental health recovery advocacy movement who refer to themselves as "survivors"—not just because they have survived mental illness but because they have survived harmful treatments. In contrast, the term *survivor* used to convey harmful treatment is not often heard in the addictions field. The series of recovery advocacy interviews posted on

the Faces and Voices of Recovery website would be incomplete without providing a venue to discuss such potential harm in the addictions treatment arena with those who experienced it. Toward that end, I invited Marcus Chatfield to talk about the history and practices of Straight, Inc. and the work of Survivors of Straight, Inc. Please join me in this engaging and, at times, chilling conversation.

**Bill White:** Marcus, is there anything you'd like to offer by way of an introduction to this interview?

**Marcus Chatfield:** Yes, thanks Bill, for allowing us a voice. One of the most painful side-effects of going through the Straight program is the sense of isolation that comes from feeling like nobody really knows what it was like to live within such an alien sub-culture.

I would like to share our collective experience with the professional community and clarify, for the former executives of Straight, what we went through. I'd like to inform the politicians and their advisors, who supported these Straight executives, what exactly they enabled. Hopefully this interview will also help bring empathy to some of the parents who still stand behind the practices of the program, to have a fuller picture of "what went on in group."

Straight Inc. was a "peer-counseling," substance abuse treatment program for teens that operated from 1976 until 1993, in nine states across America. Executives of Straight claimed that there were 12,000 successful graduates and that as many as 50,000 clients had received some amount of treatment in the program. The peer groups varied in size from 50 clients to more than 200 in some facilities. The average length of time in "treatment" was about 600 days, 16-18 hours a day. I will describe some aspects of the program in detail, but I want to emphasize that my descriptions will just be "the tip of the iceberg." A complete description of the daily life in Straight is far beyond the scope of any interview, but I'll do my best.

Although I am interested in documenting the Federal Government's relationship with Straight, in this discussion, rather than naming many of the key figures involved, I will focus on the experiences we shared while in the program. I would also like to talk about the technology that was utilized at Straight and its predecessor, The Seed. I will document some of the political maneuvers that temporarily protected The Seed program from collapse, but only to provide an understanding of how Straight came to be.

In avoiding the many justified accusations I could make, my intentions are not to protect the perpetrators, but to speak in such a way that might allow them to contemplate the effects of their actions upon the survivors of Straight Inc.

**Bill White:** Marcus, perhaps we can begin by having you briefly summarize the history of where Straight, Inc. came from.

**Marcus Chatfield:** To give the history of Straight, I need to start with the history of The Seed, Inc. and Synanon. Straight, Inc. branched out from The Seed in 1976, and The Seed was one of many programs that were based on Synanon in the early 1970s. I'm guessing most of your readers have heard of Synanon and the guy who started it all, Charles Dederich. I really don't think people realize though that in some of the group practices he developed, he was actually trying to get people "high" without drugs to help them stay clean, and he was doing that through some very unusual group practices.

"Through dissipation, or long hours of activity without very much sleep, we hope to bring about in you a conscious state of inebriation...we want to get you loaded without acid." ~ from the Paul Morantz Synanon Archives

Charles Dederich had been a recovering alcoholic in AA for about two years prior to becoming the charismatic leader of Synanon. The great irony of this whole story is that he began to develop his

unique practices after taking LSD in the UCLA experiments conducted by Dr. Keith Ditman and Dr. Sidney Cohen in 1957. These LSD experiments were funded by The National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH), who would also begin funding The Seed program.

Dederich said about his use of LSD, "It changed my whole life." Walker Winslow, writing for The MANAS Journal in 1961, said about Dederich, "...he believes, with what seems good reason, that LSD was responsible for the personal clarity and drive from which Synanon emerged."

Charles Dederich believed that he could induce in others, through specialized group practices, the realizations he'd had while on acid. These were transformative, emotional, cathartic realizations about non-duality, the nature of suffering, and the power of love. He believed that if other recovering addicts experienced these insights, they would stay clean and sober. This was the birth of Synanon, and it seemed to work wonders.

These unique practices would eventually grow and develop into an entire subculture. This subculture would be modified into the program model for The Seed and Straight. There was a whole special lingo, words that the outside world would not recognize. There was a whole universe of rules, hierarchy, rituals, and punishments, all geared towards strengthening the bond of the group and isolating its members from the outside world.

The foundation of it all was Synanon's "Game," where members met three times a week to engage in Dederich's version of confrontation therapy. Members broke each other down, interrogated one another, and confronted each other about the psychological deficiencies that could potentially take them back to drugs. The Game was conducted by adults who were hard core, physically addicted, heroin addicts. Unlike the teens of The Seed and Straight, they always had the option of leaving Synanon by their own free-will.

By comparison, The Seed and Straight would become "hyper-Synanons." These programs recruited the entire family,

but only the families of non-addicted teenagers. Straight's own literature stated that no clients with physical addiction were admitted.

Clients of The Seed and Straight would be forcibly kept, serving an indefinite sentence, and subjected to multiple sessions, or "raps," of confrontation and confession every day, for a minimum of 12 hours a day, for months on end, and in some cases, years.

Synanon's version of the Game was non-violent but in Straight, the raps were full of threatening and profane verbal abuse, face-spitting, and violent floor restraints...every day. There are also well-documented cases of broken bones, beatings, and worse forms of torture. These were usually perpetrated by the group, but sometimes by junior staff and executive staff members as well.

The parents and siblings of the Seed and Straight families would be trained as well in a parallel program of regular meetings. Families were carefully educated in the proper ways to handle society's criticism of the program and were trained to embrace a fundamentalist devotion to the virtues of the program.

But Synanon was nothing like this, not in the early days at least. At the time, Charles Dederich really did seem to have discovered a revolutionary method. Adults who had not been able to shake off their addictions were finally able to live clean through having these insightful, cathartic experiences and by choosing to live in this unique community of recovery.

This was all taking root during the cultural revolution of the 1960s when America was starting to get desperate in the "War on Drugs." Federal researchers in Lexington, Kentucky, at the US Narcotic Farm, an addictions research prison, became curious about Synanon's methods and its success. They hired some recovering addicts from "The Farm" to go to California and join Synanon for the purposes of learning and reporting on their practices. With the help of these members of Synanon, NIMH set up a small-scale Synanon-type group there at the Addictions Research

Center called the Matrix House. Substance abuse treatment historian Nancy Campbell says it was “a spectacular failure.” After two years, the clients had threatened and abused each other to such extremes that they were arrested. This research was terminated because the environment was found to produce extreme anti-social tendencies in the participants.

As this research could have predicted, Synanon too, eventually developed a reputation for violence, including murder attempts on those who criticized their community. This theme of violence would eventually play out in all of Straight's many branches as well.

I don't know what the people at NIMH were thinking, but in 1972, the year they terminated the Matrix House experiment, they also gave 1.4 million dollars to The Seed. The Seed was a non-licensed, privately run, Synanon-style prison for teens in Florida who had a history of relatively minor drug use. I still wonder why the inherent potential dangers that NIMH researchers had documented were being ignored in this massive grant to The Seed.

Art Barker, the guy who started The Seed, had lots of charisma, but his professional credentials were non-existent. Before creating The Seed in 1970, he was employed as a stand-up comedian at a Playboy Club and was involved in AA.

A few months ago, I talked to several people over at NIMH about this. I wrote to them, “Dear People at NIMH, I was in Straight and I'm researching the history of the program. I'm just wondering, ‘Why did you all give so much money to such an incompetent person? Why in the world would you give a comedian running a private prison for teens 1.4 million dollars?’” They confirmed that NIMH did indeed make the grant and said they would research it. They wrote back a month later saying that they never endorsed Straight or anything like it. Personally, I'd say a gift of 1.4 million dollars is actually a pretty GIGANTIC endorsement. This sort of lack of accountability seems to go hand in hand with programs like The Seed and Straight.

Regardless, it was a rather large amount of support from the federal government to get the program up and going. There was also a large amount of political “support” to keep the place from being shut down. I have well-documented examples of the political pressure placed upon Florida's licensing boards to ignore the abusive practices that were taking place in The Seed.

Art Barker had set up his unconventional rehabilitation facility without a license, initially with federal funding from the LEAA, now known as the Department of Justice Programs. By the time he was given the NIMH grant, he had already established a reputation for his unconventional practices, false imprisonment, fire and safety issues, and for his notorious lack of courtesy with state licensing officials. Here's a statement by Dr. Raymond Killinger, former Regional Chairman, Broward County Health and Rehabilitation, Drug Abuse Programs, writing to Governor Askew in a letter regarding licensure:

“I object in the strongest terms to the Gestapo training tactics of The Seed. It's the same old story of the ends justifying the means. This program has inherently all the dangers of another McCarthy era. The automatic responses of those people who do graduate from The Seed are, in my opinion, representative of a “cult” and do not represent a rehabilitated citizen.”  
(May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1973)

Many professional psychologists and MDs in the licensing board were against Art Barker's program. These are the words of psychologist Jeffery J. Elenewski, PhD, Drug Abuse Task Force, Planning and Licensing Board of the Comprehensive Health Planning Council of South Florida, writing to Gov. Askew about being pressured to license The Seed without a review:

“I feel that such a request is a shameful attempt at political pressure, and I strongly resent it. Approximately two weeks ago, I was informed that you personally exerted pressure through Mr.

Frank Nelson of the Division of Health and Rehabilitative Services to silence Mr. Charles Lincoln, our State of Florida Regional Director for the Drug Abuse Program, concerning his statements on The Seed, Inc. I am angered and appalled.”

He goes on to talk about losing faith in the democratic process and ends with... “Control by political favoritism is worse than no control at all.” (April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1973)

Governor Askew simplified things by revamping the entire Florida State Licensing procedure manual, replacing Dr. Killinger with a local Sheriff and ordering the investigation of the doctors who were outspoken against The Seed. This enabled The Seed to operate for another two years. Why would he ignore the opinions of so many well qualified professionals? Who was backing him up in this display of force?

The Seed lost its federal grant after a Congressional investigation in 1974. In Congress’ report, “Individual Rights and Federal Role in Behavior Modification,” The Seed was described as using “brainwashing” techniques similar to those endured by American POWs in the Korean War.

Another addictions expert, Dr. Stephen Glenn, who was the Director of the United States Office of Education Regional Training Center at the University of Miami, Division of Addiction Sciences, and a member of the Florida State Drug Abuse Task Force, put it this way:

“...the program is applying a treatment designed for hard-lined, recalcitrant alcoholics who cannot make it in society and have to depend on a subculture for support.

I personally question the validity of applying this methodology to adolescents who are not addicts and who need to learn how to participate in society more fully. The Seed forces them to forego normal interaction with non-seedlings at a critical period in their lives.

Since the Seed has not demonstrated significantly more success than other

approaches to the non-addicted adolescent, I have considerable personal concern for the long-term effects of this type of program on the type of client it is actually serving.”

There are many letters like this written by equally important PhDs, psychiatrists, and various community professionals. You'd think that would have been the end of such a program. But it was only the beginning; things would get worse, and this theme of political weight suppressing the concerns of qualified professionals would continue, and still continues in many of today's abusive teen programs.

When The Seed closed its doors, future United States Ambassadors Mel Sembler and Joseph Zapalla, both having kids in The Seed and believing deeply in the changes The Seed brought their families, opened the doors right back up under a new name. This program was now called Straight, Inc. The name was different and they had moved across town, but the staff, clients, and practices were the same.

Soon, the political pressure would no longer come from a single state Governor, but from Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr. With their political support overriding the many different professionals' concerns, Straight, Inc. branched out across the entire country. I can't help but be curious about the people who were in a position to advise these Presidents, and I wonder what ties these advisors may have had to Straight. Below are some of the resources that further document the information we have discussed so far.

<http://www.rickcross.com/reference/synanon/synanon9.html> (history of Synanon)

[http://www.paulmorantz.com/the\\_synanon\\_story/the-birth-of-charles-dederich-and-synanon-foundation-inc/](http://www.paulmorantz.com/the_synanon_story/the-birth-of-charles-dederich-and-synanon-foundation-inc/) (history of Synanon)

[http://www.manasjournal.org/pdf\\_library/VolumeXIV\\_1961/XIV-06.pdf](http://www.manasjournal.org/pdf_library/VolumeXIV_1961/XIV-06.pdf) (1961 article on Synanon, Dederich's LSD use)

Campbell, N. & Olsen, J.P. (2008) *Narcotic Farm: The rise and fall of America's first drug prison for addicts*. Abrams.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1937175/> (Matrix House)

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/26287831/Individual-Rights-and-the-Federal-Role-in-Behavior-Modification-A-Study-Prepared-by-the-Staff-of-the-Subcommittee-on-Constitutional-Rights-of-the-Com>  
(Congressional Report on The Seed includes NIMH grant and professional testimony)

[http://www.survivingstraightinc.com/SeedFloridaGovernmentDocs/SeedLetters/Seed-Governors-Office-GovAskew\\_Combine.pdf](http://www.survivingstraightinc.com/SeedFloridaGovernmentDocs/SeedLetters/Seed-Governors-Office-GovAskew_Combine.pdf)  
(letters of Killinger and Ellenewski)

[http://survivingstraightinc.com/SeedFloridaGovernmentDocs/SeedInvestigations/April12-1974-HRS-Memorandums-and-subcommittee-Glenn-comments-page-1\\_Combine.pdf](http://survivingstraightinc.com/SeedFloridaGovernmentDocs/SeedInvestigations/April12-1974-HRS-Memorandums-and-subcommittee-Glenn-comments-page-1_Combine.pdf) (letter of Stephen Glenn)

[http://survivingstraightinc.com/document\\_library/the\\_seed\\_-\\_florida\\_government\\_documents](http://survivingstraightinc.com/document_library/the_seed_-_florida_government_documents) (400+ pages of Seed documents)

[http://survivingstraightinc.com/document\\_library/federal\\_state\\_government\\_documents\\_-\\_straight\\_inc-1](http://survivingstraightinc.com/document_library/federal_state_government_documents_-_straight_inc-1) (300+pages of Straight documents)

<http://www.rickross.com/groups/straightinc.html> (links and articles about Straight)

<http://www.thestraights.com/> (A vast amount of information including an online book about Straight, *A Clockwork Straight*, by Wes Fager)

<http://survivingstraightinc.com/> (The most current source of information, including survivors' testimony, a document library, links to news articles, and the Straight survivor's petition)

**Bill White:** Describe the methods used at Straight, Inc. that are of particular concern to those who survived the experience.

**Marcus Chatfield:** The horror stories of abuse and torture that eventually ruined Straight's name were not isolated incidents. They occurred on a regular, routine basis, all throughout Straight's history, and they had a specific intention behind them. This daily abuse was built into the program and was the very foundation of Straight's power. We were told that it was "positive peer pressure." We were all teenagers, and for teens, peer pressure is a powerful force. We used this staff-directed force to instill in each other a willingness to internally "work the program." The only way to make it through the five phases of the program was to turn your will and your life over to the group, to emotionally bond with the group, to demonstrate a genuine internalization of the "straightling's" persona, and to show an automatic willingness to verbally abuse and violently restrain any active resisters.

All the methods of Straight were intentionally designed to break kids down, destroy the past personality, and to reconstruct each client as a "straightling." It is no exaggeration at all to say that every waking moment of every single day was absolutely controlled for this purpose, especially while on the first and second phases of the program. We had confessions and confrontations in group for twelve hours a day, six and a half days a week. Many of us spent solid months with no freedom of physical movement, no privacy and no contact with the outside world. The intentional deprivation of sleep, food, water, and sunlight is cruelty, and in Straight, these deprivations were designed into the program as a leverage of power upon teenagers.

**Bill White:** How would you compare these approaches to those used in "brainwashing" that you have investigated?

**Marcus Chatfield:** Many prominent members of the American Psychological Association have considered "brainwashing" to be a scientifically unproven theory, so I

avoid the term when speaking to the professional community.

In answer to your question, I would say that Straight, Inc. and The Seed utilized the exact techniques that had been developed by Communist regimes many decades earlier. These techniques are just as cruel and inhumane when perpetrated in the United States as when they are carried out in China, Korea, or any other Communist country. I believe that Straight and The Seed programs will eventually be known as one of the strongest examples of coercive thought reform and coercive behavior modification that the world has ever seen.

Professor Barry Beyerstein, PhD, a Canadian addictions researcher and professor at Simon Fraser University, was invited to visit Straight in 1990. Dr. Beyerstein stated that even Straight's standard intake procedure was at odds with "the central requisites of a genuine therapeutic relationship." After his visit, he published a report on his findings, citing the work of Dr. Robert J. Lifton, who is perhaps the world's most prominent expert on coercive thought reform.

Dr. Lifton had studied the techniques that were developed in the reform prisons of Communist China, North Korea and the USSR. Here are excerpts from Lifton's book, *The Psychology of Totalism*. I will use Dr. Lifton's "Eight Criteria for Coercive Thought Reform" as a framework of comparison between Straight and a Communist reform prison. There are many examples I could give for each of the criteria and how they were implemented in Straight, but I'll try to keep it brief.

## 1. Milieu Control

*The most basic feature of the thought reform environment, the psychological current upon which all else depends, is the control of human communication. Through this milieu control, the totalist environment seeks to establish domain over not only the individual's communication with the outside (all that he sees and hears, reads and writes, experiences, and expresses), but also —*

*in its penetration of his inner life — over what we may speak of as his communication with himself. It creates an atmosphere uncomfortably reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984 (Page 420).*

In the first and second phase of the program, we were seated in group all day, only allowed to speak when called on. Our progress hinged upon speaking in group; we called it "relating." Relating was a privilege that we earned through "motivating." We did not simply raise our hands; we had to flap our arms over our heads, as hard as possible, all day long. In the raps, there was this rhythm of motivation.... talk.... motivation.... talk. When called on, we were to confess a specific past incident of drug use, confront a member of the group, or describe in specific terms the ways we were internalizing the group's values and rules.

While being transported to and from the host home and the building, we were discouraged from reading the street signs or billboards. At night in the host home, we were also forbidden to read anything, even a cereal box. This would have been a distraction from ourselves, avoidance of the urgent need to become strong in our program.

No phone calls, no letters, no books, no contact with anyone at all who was outside the program. In the first phase, parental contact was limited to a bi-weekly, closely supervised confession to our parents. This six-minute meeting was only earned through several weeks of earnest group participation. During that six minutes, we were required to apologize for a "specific past incident" of drug use and describe our guilt and shame at length. Any mention of anything besides the incident and our guilt and shame over it would result in losing the privilege to apologize to our parents and extreme, prolonged confrontation from the group.

## 2. Mystical Manipulation

*The inevitable next step after milieu control is extensive personal manipulation. This manipulation assumes a no-holds-barred character, and uses every possible device at the*

*milieu's command, no matter how bizarre or painful. Initiated from above, it seeks to provoke specific patterns of behavior and emotion in such a way that these will appear to have arisen spontaneously from within the environment. This element of planned spontaneity, directed as it is by an ostensibly omniscient group, must assume, for the manipulated, a near-mystical quality (Page 422).*

The more a kid resisted the group's help, the harder the group was on them. Every infraction of even the smallest rule was met with confrontation and punishment. We were all intentionally sleep-deprived by the very schedule; malnourished and chronically hungry; deprived of sufficient water, all sunlight, and fresh air. When this was not sufficient to bring about a genuine surrender, some "misbehavers" were put on "consequences," allowed to sleep at night for 15 minutes on the hour, forcibly made to stand for the other 45 minutes. When on consequences, we were allowed to eat only peanut butter for days on end and forced to ask for every single piece of toilet paper by repeating "By the courtesy of my humble host home, may I please have a sheet of toilet paper." There were many other bizarre humiliations that clients were subjected to.

We faced constant interrogations, accusations, ridicule, and violent confrontations. This would go on for as many days as were necessary to cause the client to realize that he/she had a drug problem. This was "tough love," and it was this "love" that would bring about a "genuine spiritual awakening," causing them to finally see their own powerlessness. This was called a spiritual awakening, but really it was just a matter of being broken down, and the beginning of turning "our will and our life" over to the group. Only then, at this moment of compliance, would we receive gentleness and acceptance and empathy from the group. Only in being broken were we rewarded with love. The group was always so moved by the beauty of Straight at these individual turning points. These experiences were to be seen as proof that Straight was the only way to get kids get off drugs.

### **3. The Demand For Purity**

*The experiential world is sharply divided into the pure and the impure, into the absolutely good and the absolutely evil. The good and the pure are of course those ideas, feelings, and actions which are consistent with the totalist ideology and policy; anything else is apt to be relegated to the bad and the impure. Nothing human is immune from the flood of stern moral judgments (Page 423).*

In our case, the world was divided into that which would help us stay sober and that which would take us back to drugs. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase, we earned the privilege of going back to school and returning to group each afternoon. We were gradually reintroduced to the outside world as we slowly progressed through the "phases" of the program. Things like jean jackets, the music of known drug addicts, or R-rated movies were punishable threats to our sobriety; these things were said to have the power to take us back to drugs. Talking to people who displayed any "druggie image" or who had escaped or been withdrawn from the program would result in being started over to day one, and being set back to first phase. Talking to, or even looking at, anyone of the opposite sex was also a highly punishable offense.

### **4. The Cult of Confession**

*The totalist confession takes on a number of special meanings. It is [a] kind of personal purification, a means of maintaining a perpetual inner emptying or psychological purge of impurity; this purging milieu enhances the totalists' hold upon existential guilt. Second, it is an act of symbolic self-surrender, the expression of the merging of individual and environment. Third, it is a means of maintaining an ethos of total exposure-a policy of making public (or at least known to the Organization) everything possible about the life experiences, thoughts and passions of each individual (Pages 425-426).*

Our whole world was reduced down to the endless talking about our internal world and listening to others do the same. This was the whole of our life's activity, each and every day. Seated in chairs, in group, motivating, talking, motivating, talking...the floor was white, the ceiling was white...the walls were white, and bare except for signs displaying Straight's slogans, AA's "steps," the Serenity Prayer, and a big American flag. The sensory deprivation combined with the same endless messages, rehashed over and over in the same way, was only broken up with the same meager lunch or dinner, eaten while seated in group. We were allowed two quick bathroom breaks: one at lunch, one at dinner. These breaks to the bathroom were a welcome relief from the constant pressure of group even though we were closely watched while urinating and defecating. When we were permitted out of our chairs, we were escorted by "oldcomers" (clients who had progressed to the second phase), with their hand inside the back of our pants. Free movement was a privilege that was slowly earned by consistently proving your desire to "work the program." The short, routine breaks between "raps" only got us ready for the next rap.

In group, we were constantly prodded to talk about our "program" and "our past." It was the same at night in the host homes. After the long day of motivating, listening, and talking in this way, we were required to write our Moral Inventories or "MIs," our written confessions. Every night before being allowed to sleep, we were required to compose two pages that detailed both the ways we were internalizing the program and our negative feelings about the past. This was to be memorized and recited to our "oldcomer." Only then were we granted our 4-6 hours of sleep. There was really no waking moment that we were free from this endless prompting to reveal our feelings. There was no empty space or down time. Any empty space in the daily routine of confessions would have allowed a space inside us for the old self to exist.

## 5. The Aura of Sacred Science

*The totalist milieu maintains an aura of sacredness around its basic dogma, holding it out as an ultimate moral vision for the ordering of human existence. This sacredness is evident in the prohibition (whether or not explicit) against the questioning of basic assumptions, and in the reverence which is demanded (Page 427).*

We sang many songs that worshiped the program, "Straight, Straight, Straight, Straight, can you tell me how I feel? You have given me my life, Straight I love you." The Straight program was unquestionably omnipotent, and Straight's executive staff members were like gods. They were living manifestations of ultimate power and represented the source of our Straight reality.

Of course, I know now that most of the executive staff members were completely unqualified and unprofessional; many of them were merely parents of clients who had successfully graduated the program.

## 6. Loading the Language

*The language of the totalist environment is characterized by the thought-terminating cliché. The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. The cult invents a new vocabulary, giving well-known words special new meanings, making them into trite clichés (Page 429).*

We had a whole specialized language. We had a whole distinct vocabulary. These slogans became the phrases we thought with, internally "working the program." We adapted to the language of the group in order to have human connection, and by adopting this new language, we unknowingly adopted a whole new mental framework.

## 7. Doctrine over Person

*Another characteristic feature of ideological totalism: the subordination of human experience to the claims of doctrine (Page 430).*

We were trained to re-picture the past through the lens of Straight, which showed us that our old friends used us, that we had hated ourselves in the past, that we'd had no genuine aspirations in life, and that the only thing we had wanted was to get high. We were required to speak about each and every past incident of drinking or using drugs in detail, over and over again, in this light. Any fond memories of the past became our own enemies. If we spoke of the fond memories from our past, we were punished.

We were also required to frame any current frustrations or displeasure with the program as an indication of weakness in our own individual sobriety. Absolutely nothing whatsoever could be expressed as a fault in a staff member or in the program. Staff was always right, and Straight was always right.

## 8. Dispensed Existence

*The totalist environment draws a sharp line between those whose right to existence can be recognized, and those who possess no such right (Page 433).*

This last aspect of coercive thought reform is one of the most tragic to me personally. I think of all the kids I knew in Straight who got out and committed suicide soon after. We told them over and over that they did not deserve to be loved by the group until they agreed with the group. At the same time, we would not let them leave. Some of those who committed suicide had not only graduated, but had become staff members, leading the raps and directing the confrontations. But somewhere inside them, there was this doubt about being lovable and deserving to live. There has not been any credible research on the long-term effects of Straight, but judging by the many from my group who have taken their own lives, the overall suicide rate must be astronomical.

I have been processing these experiences for 23 years, and I still have days when I just can't believe how incredibly wrong it was. I have spent my whole adult life trying to understand how the program worked and how it enslaved us. It was slavery through torture. The top executives of Straight made millions and millions of dollars, but we were doing all the work, desperately trying to earn our way out of there by perpetuating the cycle.

Additional information can relate to this discussion can be found at the following web site.

<http://www.meadowhaven.org/liftoncriteria.pdf> (Lifton's Eight Criteria of Thought Reform, from his book *The Psychology of Totalism*)

[http://thestraights.com/essays/beyerstein\\_report\\_on\\_straight.htm](http://thestraights.com/essays/beyerstein_report_on_straight.htm) (excerpts from Barry Beyerstein's report on Straight)

**Bill White:** As I understand it, the methods used at Straight, Inc. continued to be used by other programs without using the Straight, Inc. name.

**Marcus Chatfield:** Yes. When the various Straight programs were eventually sued to the point of losing their insurance policies, accreditation, and finally their licenses to operate, a new name would appear on the building, often overnight. The staff did not change, the clients remained and the program would continue. Sometimes an executive staff member would set up a program out of state once he or she had been sued too many times. For example, when Miller Newton, former national director of Straight, was sued for violently abusing clients in Florida, he simply moved to New Jersey, came up with a new name, and started the KIDS programs.

This sort of thing has happened over and over. The parents were trained to believe that the program was the sole reason their "druggie kid" was still alive, and that criticism of the program was just an example of how druggies tell lies. These directors had the hysterical support of the parents, which combined with the parent's denial of the

abuse and the powerful political support, allowed them to shake off the past with a simple name change. There were at least 16 different programs that evolved out of Straight. Currently, the AARC program in Alberta, Canada, a descendant of the KIDS program, is the only one that I know of still operating. Many families currently involved in AARC say that their teens would be dead without the program. There has been extensive media coverage on the AARC program by the CBC. See below:

[http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/2008-2009/powerless/aarc\\_treatment\\_records.html](http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/2008-2009/powerless/aarc_treatment_records.html) ("Powerless" CBC story on AARC)

**Bill White:** What do you consider the worst abuses you experienced or witnessed at Straight, Inc.?

**Marcus Chatfield:** I regularly saw kids have psychotic breakdowns and just get restrained by other kids, screamed at, ridiculed by the staff, and put on consequences. The people who really needed help just got more of the same treatment that was hurting them in the first place. I saw people being broken almost every day for my whole program. I was abusive as well. I wanted to get through the program; I'd tried to run away and was court ordered, so I became a good "straightling."

It's very hard to say what's worse, when even the moments of tenderness and group bonding only served to set the stage for more harm to be done. In that sense, the gentle moments were really the worst because they caused us to embrace the violence, torture, and verbal abuse that much deeper.

**Bill White:** You have had the opportunity to talk with many survivors of Straight, Inc. What do you think are some of the long-term residual effects that you and others have experienced as a result of these abuses?

**Marcus Chatfield:** Many have been diagnosed with PTSD. Almost all have a one- or two-year gap of total memory loss due to dissociative amnesia. Many are just

now remembering after all these years that they were even in Straight at all. It's common to hear of trust issues, boundary issues, abusive relationships, failed relationships, and heavy drug use immediately after being released. Many speak about the guilt over being required to perpetrate abuse as the only means of progress through the program. Many speak of the devastation over realizing that they were "brainwashed" and are struggling with questions about their integrity and identity. There is a long list of typical side effects directly related to this type of experience: chronic anxiety, panic disorders, social phobias like fear of groups and confrontation, low self-esteem, wrecked family relationships, depression, and chronic nightmares.

Another side effect of Straight is that some of its former clients are completely sober. I think it's more than fair to call that a side effect of the experience though. All of the people I know who believe they were helped by being in Straight also report many of these negative side effects and acknowledge the abuse as well.

In speaking with Straight survivors, I have heard many describe symptoms that I believe are unique to the experiences we shared during these very formative years. I have been in contact with a psychologist who has spoken with several different survivors. He agrees with my assertion that there is a unique syndrome that we share, perhaps with the survivors of other Synanon-based programs that were designed for adolescents.

**Bill White:** One of the intriguing things about this story is that in its heyday, the leaders of Straight, Inc. were able to rally leading addiction experts and leading political figures to their defense when Straight, Inc.'s methods first came under public criticism. How do you understand how such experts became accomplices in enabling the abuses of Straight, Inc.?

**Marcus Chatfield:** Straight operated with the political protection and endorsement of the White House and many within the Republican Party. As the lawsuits increased

in frequency and the financial penalties added up, The Reagan and Bush administrations both responded with TV commercials, telethons, and official State visits, promoting Straight as one of America's Points of Light and as Nancy Reagan's favorite treatment center. There were many prominent "experts" who were influential in enabling the systematic abuses of the Straight program. Some worked side by side with our country's leaders, steering this presidential support, and ensuring a legitimate public image for Straight, in the face of widespread concern.

**Bill White:** How have those who experienced abuses within Straight, Inc. rallied to expose these abuses?

**Marcus Chatfield:** There have been many successful lawsuits, protests, and public speaking events that have resulted in the closure of these types of programs. There has been a complaint filed with the United Nations and many complaints filed with the ACLU. Currently, there are numerous websites, written articles, and an online petition asking for an acknowledgement and an apology from the professionals and politicians who endorsed and perpetrated Straight's practices.

So far, only one former executive staff member has apologized and acknowledged his part in the abuses of Straight. That is Richard Mullinax. His apology was a turning point in my life, and I know of many survivors who experience a similar sense of validation from his response to our petition. He's the only one who's had the courage and the heart to respond though. I hope this interview will cause other former Straight executives to reflect on the potential healing they could bring to our community by following Richard's example.

Some executive staff members have called the survivors of these programs "wackos" who need to move on and "get a life." For us though, these abuses are not yet in the past. Many are currently in the midst of recalling these abuses for the first time since they occurred. As long as the perpetrators and enablers remain

unapologetic, these abuses will remain a current event. I would love to see us all move on, knowing that programs like Straight aren't hurting people anymore.

The people who ran these programs aren't able to live up to the standards they held us to as kids. One of the tenets of Straight was to "make amends to the best of our ability." It would be great to see them apply that part of their program today. Amends might be impossible, but the lack of remorse from the directors of this program is unacceptable.

<http://www.petitiononline.com/295561me/petition.html> (copy of petition and online signatures)

[http://survivingstraightinc.com/survivors\\_request\\_for\\_apology\\_1\\_apology\\_received](http://survivingstraightinc.com/survivors_request_for_apology_1_apology_received) (Apology of one Straight, Inc. executive staff member)

**Bill White:** What type of redress would you and other survivors of Straight, Inc. like to see?

**Marcus Chatfield:** We would like to see a congressional investigation into the government activities that enabled Straight to operate.

We would like to see an IRS investigation.

We ask for an apology from the Federal Government for its funding and role in endorsing this program.

We would like to obtain federal funding for research into the long-term effects of this type of program.

We would like to see the survivors of all federally funded, Synanon-based programs be entitled to reparations that would provide for psychological counseling.

**Bill White:** What is your advice to individuals in treatment or their family members who are concerned about such potential abuses?

**Marcus Chatfield:** Here is a checklist to help parents identify potentially abusive programs:

<http://www.safety.org/on-residential-treatment/459-a-start-what-to-look-out-for-at-a-residential-program>

Here is a site dedicated to exposing currently operating abusive programs for “troubled teens”:

<http://www.reddit.com/r/troubledteens/>

If you are in a facility where abuse has occurred, you have the human obligation to report it to the police. If you work at a facility and are aware of abuse being perpetrated, you also have a legal responsibility and can be prosecuted for failure to report it.

In my opinion, there is nothing therapeutic about “coercive therapy.” Some people are campaigning to establish Federal regulation on the behavior modification industry, but I'm not so sure that regulating a technology that is so utterly non-therapeutic is a good idea. I believe that this industry has remained unregulated in order to protect the owners of these programs from scrutiny, but regulation might legitimize the practices that in my opinion, should have been outlawed as soon as NIMH researchers concluded that this technology hurts people.

**Bill White:** Where can people find more information about Straight, Inc.?

**Marcus Chatfield:** This website has the most current information as well as historical documents and contains links to many other websites and forums as well:

<http://survivingstraightinc.com/>

**Bill White:** Are there any final reflections you would share with our readers?

**Marcus Chatfield:** I've heard many survivors say, “Nobody knows what it was really like.” That is, in part, because it's nearly impossible to describe such an alien

subculture without sounding like a suspicious alien yourself and being quickly dismissed.

I really hope that this interview will help folks be more interested in preventing these types of programs from hurting people today. I have been speaking about the two programs I am knowledgeable about, but I feel a sense of solidarity with the survivors of all abusive, coercive programs. Although Straight and The Seed are now defunct, the story of The Seed and Straight still continues today. Some of today's most abusive programs are still closely tied with the Republican Party and even receive Federal funding. This will continue as long as we allow it.

I'd also like to say.... If you were in Straight and are just recently remembering it for the first time, please know you are not alone. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you need support. There are many active online forums, each with its own lively bunch of survivors who'd be happy to hear from you.

Finally, I'd like to let your readers know that I am very interested in documenting the details of the creation of The Seed and who, in addition to Art Barker, may have helped design the program. Any information about this would be appreciated. I can be contacted at dragonfly-1969@live.com.

Thanks, Bill, for caring. I know a lot of people will be comforted just knowing that you are willing to help us in being understood.

**Bill White:** Marcus, thank you for your willingness to do this interview and for your sustained advocacy on behalf of the survivors of Straight, Inc. and similar programs.