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## 'STRAIGHT AHEAD' TO A BETTER LIFE

BY ART GERMAN

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**A onetime seaside motel . . . a realistic and comprehensive program . . . dedicated staff. Those are the ingredients that make for an effective—and rare—live-in program to put drug abusers on the right track.**

Motorists driving along the Coast Highway in Dana Point, Orange County, sometimes stop and ask for a room when they see the "Straight Ahead" sign at the entrance to an establishment which looks like a motel.

At one time, the Straight Ahead headquarters was, indeed, a motel, a tile-roofed horseshoe of separate units located less than a block from the beach and Pacific surf. Since 1974, when Straight Ahead moved into the premises, it has been a residence center for drug abusers, a place where some 50 hard-core men and women get the kind of help they need to overcome their problems and lead normal lives.

The passing motorist now can't get a room at this particular inn, but as he is sent politely on his way he probably has no idea of the intensive activities taking place at Straight Ahead. The organization's brochure sums it up in a sentence: "Straight Ahead provides housing, meals, counseling, psychological services, medical services, courses in life management skills, creative living, self-awareness classes and court liaison services."

Translated into human terms, services such as these can make all the difference between continued drug addiction and a new life free of drugs and filled with promise and hope.

Take the case of John Bolander, for example. Now 24, Bolander came to Straight Ahead in 1976 after having been a drug user since the age of 11. On parole from the California Youth Authority, young Bolander was accepted into the Straight Ahead program and stayed for 1½ years. He has been back in the community now for almost two years, is married, working as a self-employed contractor, and says with the kind of conviction that you can believe: "It's all behind me now."

The friendly, outgoing Bolander comes back regularly to Straight Ahead, sometimes to chat with old friends and counselors, and always because he is anxious to see if there is anything he can do to help.

"In years past," he recalls, "I didn't have any values or goals. When I was in the county jail or at the Youth Authority, there was peer pressure, but it was a negative thing. Here, I also found peer pressure, but it was pressure to change. The difference was that the people here, both staff and residents, cared about each other and wanted to help."

Straight Ahead's director is John Bowler, a drug addict himself for 19 years before he finally came to grips with his problem and overcame it. He first opened a drug rehabilitation project in Ontario, San Bernardino County, and then located the Dana Point motel which appeared ideal for a long-term intensive residential program.

Bowler was ill with pneumonia on the day we visited Straight Ahead, but his co-workers recalled that the opening was accomplished over the opposition of nearby residents. Earnest Neal, house coordinator who has been with Straight Ahead since it opened, recalled there were picketing protestors outside the facility during the first days. The community's attitude has since taken a complete about face. Residents have demonstrated they are no source of trouble whatever, and frequently help with community by participating in clean-up programs and other improvement activities.

Straight Ahead currently has a capacity of 51 residents, with Orange County assigning 36 under contract with the facility. The Youth Authority regularly places a half dozen parolees at Straight Ahead, and the results, according to Regional Parole Administrator Lew Brusca, have been extremely heartening. Brusca feels that the intensive, caring program offered by Straight Ahead has been tremendously effective in helping parolees free themselves of their past dependence on drugs and in succeeding in the community.

Everyone who comes to Straight Ahead does so voluntarily and no one is forced to remain against his or her will. When a new resident arrives he is asked to be seated first on what Neal termed the "prospect bench," a small, orange seat just outside the office on the sidewalk. There, a counselor talks to the new arrival and asks a simple question: "Why are you here?"

The question, Neal said, gives the newly-arrived resident a chance to sort out his feelings and make him more receptive to the help he hopes to receive in the center. Then, he or she is familiarized with the Straight Ahead program and the period of residency begins.

The rehabilitation program averages around six months and is divided into three stages. During the first stage, residents remain at the center around-the-clock during which they attend five encounter groups weekly, and participate in daily education classes and seminars. They also attend individual counseling sessions and are in regular contact with counselor role-models who are former addicts. During this period, which lasts from two to three months, the residents seek to improve their self-image and understand their personal abilities and shortcomings. They are given work assignments which enable them to learn self-responsibility, develop self-reliance and work effectively with others. The entire group works closely together and a family spirit is designed to support and reinforce each resident's ability to succeed.

Stage II is geared to help the resident move into activities that are geared to help his or her re-entry in the community. Assigned classes now stress job interviews, personal budgeting and constructive social life. The resident continues to live at the center but may begin to go out into the community for job interviews or to see family and friends. The goal of this stage is to help residents get jobs compatible with their interests and abilities and to develop healthy social relationships.

During Stage III, residents leave Straight Ahead and return to the community, to work, go to school or carry out other activities that are compatible with successful rehabilitation. The "break" with Straight Ahead is not designed to be complete or abrupt at this stage. Clients are encouraged to return and attend group sessions on a "drop-in" basis. After three months outside, the former students receive a "graduation" certificate denoting completion of the Straight Ahead program.

A comprehensive education program is one of the highlights of the Straight Ahead strategy of rehabilitation. Educational services are coordinated by June Bowler, former wife of the director, who is assisted by Shirley Good, a part-time teacher. Educational components include a high school program which is carried out in conjunction with the Capistrano adult school and college-level classes offered through Saddleback College.

The high school program stresses survival living, along with courses on food and women's studies. Subjects covered included relating to other people, consumer education, job readiness skills and self evaluation. The survival education program requires residents to give speeches every two weeks as a way of building self confidence.

Building of self esteem also is a component of the women's courses which cover areas such as makeup, dress, self-image and assertiveness skills. The college program, with seven classes to be offered this spring, include preparatory English, group dynamics, parenting and alternatives to drug abuse.

Ms. Bowler said the educational components integrates the philosophy of the entire program by helping residents deal with the problems they are going to encounter in the community.

"Each part reinforces the others," she said. "Academic achievement is designed to fill any deficiencies that all of us have and prepare the resident for a better life."

Most of the residents are assigned in groups of four to the former motel rooms and are advised at the outset that adherence to certain rules is mandatory. Most of the rules are commonsensical, in fact a few can be found in the Ten Commandments and include such strictures as "no stealing," "no sexist conduct," and "no drugs or alcohol."

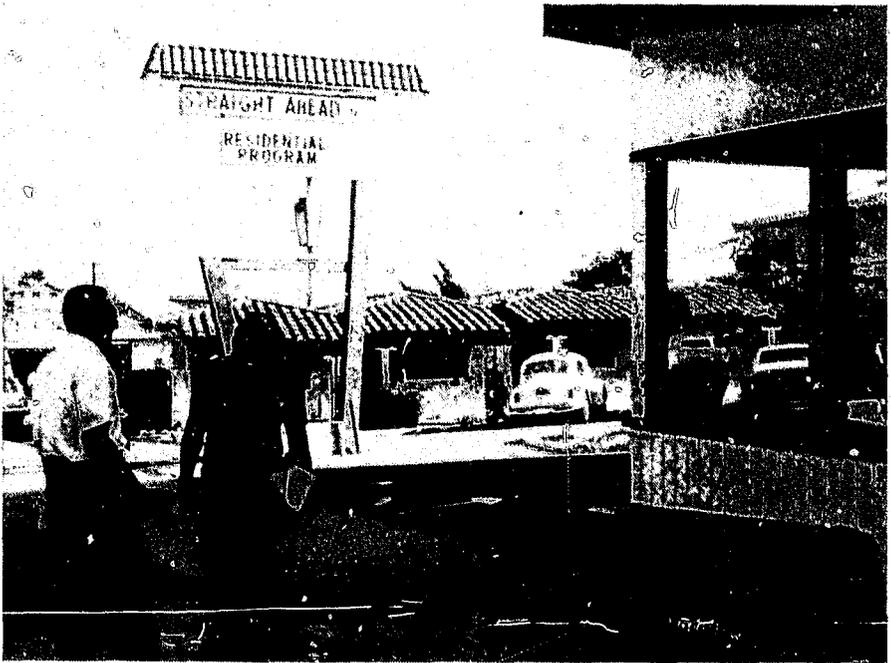
These and other no-no's are subject to what is euphemistically described as a "learning experience"; the word punishment is not used at Straight Ahead. Since nothing is forced—the ultimate punishment is expulsion from the project—the learning experience has to represent a jolt, something that will truly impress the rules violator. Often the resident who commits a violation is asked by his peers: "What will you give up to stay here with us?" The decision is reached by mutual agreement and may include shaving one's head, a deterrent with an effect that lasts until at least the hair grows back.

Positive behavior results in advancement to progressively better and more responsible jobs within the program and finally to Stages II and III, and a successful life in the community. Since reinforcement for this kind of positive change is a basic element in the program; the residents work together closely to support one another as all work to eliminate their past dependence on drugs. Success achieved by one resident is usually hailed as a success for the entire program.

The total therapeutic environment furnished through Straight Ahead has been strongly praised by administrators outside the program. CYA Parole Administrator Brusca has found it to be an excellent placement resource in the community.

"It's the kind of program that we need a lot more of because it absorbs the shock of re-entry and prepares the ex-offender to meet the problems he is going to face," Brusca said.

Late in 1978, the program was reviewed by a study team composed of members of the State Department of Alcohol and Drug Abuse which looked



PROSPECT BENCH—Newcomers to Straight Ahead articulate their thoughts on a small bench just outside the office.



CHOW TIME—The kitchen at Straight Ahead is large and well-equipped.



PSYCHIATRIST—Dr. Bob Anthony, who works with Straight Ahead residents, chats with board chairperson Judy Blood, left, and June Bowler, coordinator of educational services.

into organization factors, general management, case management, treatment process and treatment facility.

The findings were uniformly favorable. The team reported that it was "favorably impressed with the operations of Straight Ahead. The program appears to be well-organized with competent staff, and most of all, it provides excellent quality care to the clients."

At the head of the Department's organization chart is a Board of Directors, composed largely of residents of the community. The current chairperson is Judy Blood, a former Youth Authority staff member who is now going to school.

"What we try to do," she said, "is to look at the whole person when he or she comes here and meet their mental, nutrition, educational needs and whatever else is needed to make it in the community. It's a tough job, but it has to be done and that's what we're here for."

A Youth Authority staff has summed up the work of Straight Ahead like this:

"Straight Ahead regularly works with high risk clients who present some varied and difficult problems. Some are successful and others fail but none can say that they have not been given support or help by the staff in understanding their strengths and weaknesses."

**END**