

## **PROGRAMMING FASCISM:**

# **The Drug War on our Children**

by *Leslie Stackel*

You may think your children are being protected from the world of drug abuse by programs like STRAIGHT and D.A.R.E., and ad campaigns like those created by the Partnership for a Drug Free America. But who's backing those programs, what are they really teaching, and what are they really accomplishing?

On a sunny morning in June 1983, high-school sophomore Richard Bradbury drove 30 miles to visit his sister in a St. Petersburg, Florida drug rehabilitation center.

Their reunion would be the first since her admission, so Richard would have to be "interviewed," making certain no pro-drug conversation would pass his lips. No problem, Richard thought. Mr. Bradbury, Richard's father and traveling companion, would wait in another room.

But Richard's five-minute "interview" quickly turned into an intake procedure. Escorted down the hall to a windowless, concrete box of a room, he was promptly told by a staffer that his "evaluation" was negative. His skinny, teenaged interviewer had come to an instant diagnosis: Richard was at risk as a drug user. He'd have to be detained for treatment.

"This is a joke, right?" Richard asked. "I'm just here to see my sister. Besides, I've tried marijuana a couple of times, but I'm no user." Within minutes, the door was sealed shut. Richard could not leave the room, speak with his father, or make a phone call. Later, a team of staff members transferred Richard to a "host" home, strip-searched him, and locked him in. Thus began an 18-month-long nightmare of abduction, abuse and emotional terrorism. Richard's dad, like many parents targeted by the costly rehab program known as STRAIGHT, had been convinced on the spot by a savvy marketing pitch of its merits and his son's dangerous inclination toward drugs. STRAIGHT, its promoters told him, would protect Richard, "cure" him.

Halfway across the country, meanwhile, in northern Maine, another disturbing event was occurring. Fifth-grader Crystal Grendell one day after school decided to stop by the local police station and tell Chief Officer Gillmore of two people she knew who were growing pot -her parents. Three days later, the Grendells' home was searched, and both parents promptly arrested.

Crystal's mom lost her two part-time jobs, and Crystal developed a neurotic fear of police, admitting later she could no longer trust "any adults except my parents."

What prompted Crystal to inform on her parents was a nationwide program called D.A.R.E. -Drug Abuse Resistance Education -taught by uniformed cops to

students in public school classrooms from kindergarten through 12th grade. D.A.R.E., a \$700 million program developed under the direction of former Los Angeles Chief of Police Daryl Gates, intends to "keep kids off drugs." But instruction by police often means asking children who they know who use drugs. Marijuana and other substances are very harmful, kids are told, and they can help people who take them. Crystal wanted to help her parents. She trusted Officer Gillmore. He was her teacher. Crystal, in the end, was more than betrayed. She was emotionally traumatized and, no doubt, scarred for life.

What both events, occurring in two separate regions of the country and nearly a decade apart, have in common is that they reflect the fallout of the Drug War on our youth. Manipulative "Just Say No" policies, inherited by a new administration, seem to be taking programs for kids a step beyond mere education and treatment; they've entered a realm akin to indoctrination and mind control.

Which has some parents worried. They object to their kids being continually dosed with anti-drug curricula in classrooms and turned into miniature drug warriors, or abused in treatment detention camps for being out of synch with a government- mandated attitude about certain controlled substances.

So parents are organizing, forming groups to do battle for their kids. Some view their newfound activism as perhaps the first major populist counter-assault in a Drug War gone too far. Ever since the mid-'80s when the Reagan-Bush Drug War coffers reached upwards of \$20 billion and drug ed and treatment programs became a multi-billion dollar industry, the wear and tear on our nation's children began to show. Hordes of packaged drug ed programs, with names like ALERT, STAR and Project SMART, began to turn up in public schools. Over the next few years they proliferated. But among the dozens of acronymic "alphabet soup" nonprofits (as another reporter recently dubbed them), one stood out in highly publicized, sharp relief. That is D.A.R.E. As the largest, costliest and favorite of the feds, D.A.R.E. has spread to cities across the country with rapid-fire speed. Part of the reason was money -lots of it.

D.A.R.E. has the dubious distinction of being the sole anti-drug ed program actually legislated into popularity. When Congress passed the Drug Free Schools and Community Act of 1986, one provision ordered that 10% of state grants to governors go toward curricula that are specifically "taught in classrooms by uniformed police officers." Only one national program fit that description: D.A.R.E.

Thus, last year, D.A.R.E. America, the national coordinator for the program, received about \$10 million for training and paying cops as class instructors and building community relations -i.e., advertising. Additional funding sources came from city monies, corporate and private donations, and property seized in drug asset forfeiture. What has resulted is a promotional phenomenon not witnessed in recent educational history, a pro-D.A.R.E. marketing campaign pursued with Perotlike zeal, and a nationwide onslaught of D.A.R.E.-think in our public schools.

Gary Peterson, the Colorado-based founder of Parents Against D.A.R.E., sees this as dangerous. Students from kindergarten on up get D.A.R.E.- dosed, but the program's core concentration group, fifth-and sixth-graders, receive 17 full-hour lessons, one per week, explains Peterson. And "you'll find the program content not only in D.A.R.E. coursework, but in other subject areas, like math or spelling. D.A.R.E. has included in its Implementation Guide an agreement to be signed by each local school district, establishing the right to inject D.A.R.E. material in other subjects. So all over the country kids are living and breathing D.A.R.E. And when the officer's not around, they're still sharing about D.A.R.E. They're still spelling D.A.R.E. They're reading D.A.R.E. They're saying D.A.R.E."

Peterson believes the program ought be abolished altogether. The course material, methods of delivery and, in fact, basic philosophical premise of the program is seriously flawed, he claims. For one thing, says Peterson, the "facts" taught by police are incomplete and often incorrect. In one parent meeting on D.A.R.E., for example, an officer warned that "marijuana was the cause of a lot of family dysfunction, that it could lead to permanent brain damage and could kill." Peterson, holding up the Merck Manual medical text, corrected him, reading "verbatim from it that marijuana was not toxic," adding, "nowhere did the text say it was a killer."

Secondly, he adds, D.A.R.E. sends kids the wrong message. It's based on psychotherapeutic -not educational -theory, which has since been discredited by its own creator, humanist psychologist Carl Rogers.

Founded on Rogers' "therapeutic classroom" model, the program's aim is to "empower" kids, through information and skill-building, to enable them to make autonomous choices and resist peer pressure to do drugs or join gangs.

Police instructors, who receive 80 hours of training, use lectures and clinical techniques such as role-playing to communicate their message. In the training, certain guidelines are set down. Among them: "1) Don't tell kids not to use drugs outright, offer them autonomy; tell them the choice to use or not is theirs alone. 2) Build an atmosphere of openness and trust. Make the kids feel unjudged. Be their friend. 3) Tell kids to be aware of people who do drugs, but not to name names. (Refer any tips to the police department; don't jeopardize your own position of trusted teacher.)"

Sound oddly Orwellian?

In fact, some critics fear D.A.R.E. may do more harm than good.

Police Chief Nicholas Pastore of New Haven, CT, points out the problem of duplicity: "It's difficult for kids to comprehend a message coming in the morning from Mr. Rogers who's the same person that turns into Rambo at night." Pastore dismantled D.A.R.E. immediately upon assuming his current post four years ago, opting instead for more "holistic prevention education" which puts the drug issue "in a broader context."

Better programs than D.A.R.E. exist: certain "interactive" ventures, studies show, such as Botsan Life Skills for example -in which kids mix with classmates in small discussion groups around drug-related or other topics. D.A.R.E. falls into the type two, "noninteractive," less effective category, in which activities may be experiential, but don't have students dealing with each other directly, according to Nancy Tobler, an educator and PhD candidate at the State University at Albany. Changing kids' perceptions of social norms outside the classroom, which may be skewed, is one goal of such interaction.

"The perception of a kid may be that drugs are used by sixty percent of the population, for example, when it's, say twenty percent. But, after knowing the truth, he or she may decide maybe it's OK not to do drugs and still be cool," explains Tobler. Her own research, presented at a California conference on prevention last summer revealed that of 114 drug ed programs, more than 70 scored higher than D.A.R.E.

Critics believe not only do D.A.R.E.-like programs siphon money from better alternatives, but may spur rather than curb drug use in the long run. Dr. William Coulson, research director of the Institute of Ethnopsychology in Compton, California and a long-time, close associate of Rogers, spends much time proselytizing against D.A.R.E. and other Rogerian educational clones, like Quest, Here's Looking At You, and Values and Choices. Rogers, he says, denounced his "therapeutic classroom" as a total failure before he died in 1987. Rogers concluded that children should not be "empowered" via "nondirective therapy" in classes to make critical life decisions. Kids need more guidance than adults. And Rogers worried that once "empowered," they may make the wrong choices later on. His fears were borne out by an early predecessor of D.A.R.E.'s, Project DECIDE, tested by Stanford University. Kids in DECIDE, compared to a control group, it turned out, indulged in drugs sooner or upped their usage after the program. A second trial in 1978 mirrored those findings. Nonetheless, Rogers' model caught on in education circles. And Coulson today continues trying to undo the original damage.

Whether these programs survive the decade will depend largely on scientific data. And so far the results are mixed. For example, D.A.R.E.'s own research shows there's no proof that D.A.R.E. prevents drug use, but it does help students in terms of knowledge and attitude about drugs and the social skills needed to resist peer pressure. Such were the findings in a preliminary report issued by the Research Triangle Institute of Durham, North Carolina, hired by D.A.R.E. to cumulatively analyze a spate of small, independent, regional studies of the program. Critics, though, noting that more teenagers are now doing drugs (mainly marijuana and hallucinogens) than a year ago, point blame at D.A.R.E.-type programs. Two studies are cited as evidence: a PRIDE (Parents Resource Institute for Drug Education) survey of more than 236,000 students in 40 states -revealing that junior and senior high school student usage levels increased or remained status quo -plus a NIDA (National Institute of Drug Abuse) report reflecting a hike in use among, specifically, eighth graders.

Because D.A.R.E., the most widespread of ed ventures, concentrates so heavily on fifth and sixth graders, observers consider these stats significant, given Rogers' prediction; a sign that D.A.R.E.'s not doing the job -or worse, reversing the odds in favor of drug use.

The federal government, though, is not yet convinced. William Modzeleski, the top drug official at the Department of Education was quoted in a USA Today article last October [1995] as saying that "research shows that, no, D.A.R.E. hasn't been effective in reducing drug use." His public relations spokesman later added: "We need a comprehensive set of programs. Along with these, D.A.R.E. would be OK, but by itself, it wouldn't do the job." The department has considered asking Congress to repeal the law requiring states to give D.A.R.E. federal money. But so far, no such action has been taken. A number of governors have, however, already requested that the D.A.R.E. requirement be stricken from state allocation guidelines.

Meanwhile, during "National D.A.R.E. Day" celebrations last September dozens of Congressmen turned out for a high-visibility photo-op; also noticeably present were Attorney General Janet Reno and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Diehard program boosters all the while counter any D.A.R.E.-bashing by pointing to the "enormous popularity of the program."

And D.A.R.E. America continues to deride current study data, including RTI's, as "inconclusive," insisting that what's really needed to measure the program's success is an original, long-term, longitudinal evaluation, which, incidentally, is expected "to happen very soon, and by an independent organization." Moreover, a curriculum revision is underway. (Cops in classrooms, though, will remain a fixed element, notes a D.A.R.E. spokeswoman. The "snitch" factor is negligible; of "twenty-five million kids in D.A.R.E., only a handful of cases like that have occurred. And when a child reports a dangerous situation at home, we applaud teachers (who)...report it to the proper authorities." Even, apparently, when a child like Crystal Grendell is traumatized in the process.)

Glenn Levant, D.A.R.E.'s executive director, wasn't available for comment, but spokeswoman Roberta Silverman emphasizes that in a national Gallup poll of D.A.R.E. students, "more than ninety percent said D.A.R.E. has 'taught me what to do when someone's trying to make me do something I don't want to.'"

D.A.R.E.'s popularity among kids is inevitable, say activists like Steve Wallace of Durham, North Carolina, who belongs to a loose, bi-partisan coalition of parents that includes liberals, libertarians and right-wingers the likes of Phyllis Schafly, who oppose D.A.R.E.

"There's DARE Day in school, and the nice officers regularly hand out t-shirts and wrist watches, bumper stickers, notebooks, and other assorted program reminders featuring the DARE logo. And there are parades with colorful banners waving and big DAREmobiles. The students see the DARE logo plastered

everywhere. It's insidious," says Wallace, "but gimmicks don't prevent substance abuse."

William Hansen, a researcher at the Bowman Gray School of Public Health in Winston-Salem and an early consultant for the program who later defected from D.A.R.E., concedes that "this is something police can use to build community relations. It's not a bust 'em and get 'em program." But, he adds, "however well-intentioned, D.A.R.E. is not doing the job, it's not preventing drug use."

Meanwhile, all the controversy surrounding D.A.R.E. has led to a barrage of negative publicity.

First, the Wall Street Journal covered the Grendell case in 1991, reporting that "D.A.R.E. has pitted students against their parents in a handful of cases." National TV shows, including Larry King Live and 60 Minutes also aired D.A.R.E. segments. Then, last season, TV's L.A. Law dramatized the Grendell incident in an episode. Finally, a USA Today cover article last October blasted D.A.R.E. The headline read: "Studies Find Drug Program Not Effective."

One wonders, if D.A.R.E.-like programs are so bad, why are they thriving?

"Packaging," explains Tobler. Late '70s and early '80s anti-drug curricula, some based on Rogers' experiment, "were written to be duplicated and make money." No genuine effort went into evaluating these programs before use, she says. But they were glossily packaged. The newer, interactive programs, which "spent a lot of time on testing and research, were slower to package. Very few of these (many backed by NIDA) are set up for reproduction."

The net effect? "Teachers look at programs like D.A.R.E., see they're well-written and well-packaged and think, 'this should keep the students interested.'"

D.A.R.E.'s plan to deflect criticism has also helped keep public opinion positive. According to Madeline Webster, a civil-liberties activist in Massachusetts, parents initially weren't permitted access to D.A.R.E. school materials. Peterson says he had to sue in Colorado under the federal Hatch Act to establish their right to examine curriculum information and instructors' manuals. Parents were also told by D.A.R.E. cops the lessons were mandatory when, in fact, their permission is required for student participation. Parents who complained or doubted or probed into D.A.R.E. were often verbally attacked or slandered. Scientific researchers critical of the program's content or operation were also angrily rebuffed by D.A.R.E. officials.

Hansen comments, "D.A.R.E. cuts people off who are trying to help them...they do tend to be paranoid."

The current debate over D.A.R.E. seems representative of America's Drug War dynamics in microcosm. It's triggered questions about the violation of civil liberties and privacy rights, what constitutes effective drug policy, and whether an ideology advocating "no use" rather than "responsible use" can work.

While the viability of Just Say No-type programs are being called into question, hardline "treatment" operations, like STRAIGHT and KIDS, are emerging as even more damaging to teenagers. Both these organizations, among the worst in the drug treatment orbit and by-products of a harsh, extremist Reaganite political agenda, have been exposed as abusive, and to a degree, fraudulent ventures.

Like others that have since perished, both are descended from the early '70s, California, cultlike Synanon and The Seed. STRAIGHT was shut down following years of reported adolescent abuse, but KIDS still thrives in Bergen County, New Jersey. What finally closed STRAIGHT's doors was a one-man campaign waged by Richard Bradbury following his "incarceration" in its St. Petersburg facility in 1983. Upon his release he began to challenge the organization -a wearying task given the owner's political clout. Co-founded by Mel Sembler, a Florida businessman tight with Republican politicians (he headed Bush's Florida election fundraising effort and dropped \$125,000 himself into the GOP pot), STRAIGHT had grown into a multi-million-dollar 12-state nonprofit network since its 1976 opening, receiving oft-quoted praise from Nancy Reagan and the Princess of Wales.

When reports of brutal beatings and mental torture of STRAIGHT clients leaked out, local newspapers around the country began to cover the story, and WNBC-TV ran a short segment on the organization. But despite a rash of lawsuits in dozens of other states, no investigations were prompted and no serious action taken in response to the complaints by state or local authorities in Florida where STRAIGHT was headquartered,.

"What I witnessed there couldn't be believed," says Bradbury. He describes routine deprivation of sleep, food, and medication as part of the "treatment," plus forced admissions of illegal drug use (even when nonexistent). Physical assault was commonplace. In some cases, adolescents had to be sent to hospital emergency rooms for care of broken limbs, bloody noses, black eyes and skull contusions incurred during "treatment."

"When a kid wouldn't sit up straight in a chair and admit to whatever someone wanted him to admit, he'd be slapped, punched, and screamed at," recalls Bradbury. "When clients resisted, staffers would organize 'war parties' consisting of other clients, who were told to beat up those who wouldn't comply...you had to go along or you'd be the next victim."

Bradbury spent \$40,000 out of pocket and eight years of his life battling STRAIGHT. He rallied parents and ex-clients around the cause and finally won several lawsuits against the organization for multiple licensure and negligence violations. Like campaigns against other drug warrior-run operations, this one was hard-won. STRAIGHT's strong support system and well-oiled promo machinery kept it flourishing. An example: Word of a negative news story on STRAIGHT, scheduled by WNBC-TV prompted its executive director to travel to New York for a meeting with the station, while engineering a nationwide protest-letter-writing blitz by parents of STRAIGHT kids. And when newspaper articles

chronicling STRAIGHT's abuses would run, testimonials to the program by grateful parents would invariably appear within, as well. When confronted with tales of abuse, former national clinical director of STRAIGHT and later head of KIDS of Southern California Virgil Miller Newton told the L.A. Times that "'starry-eyed' social workers and other gullible officials are deceived by 'manipulative' drug addicts who tell 'wild stories' about treatment methods." Why do parents tolerate such violent "curative" tactics?

"Partly fear and partly indoctrination," says prevention specialist Arnold Markowitz, director of a cult hotline and several adolescent treatment programs at the Jewish Board of Children and Family Services, New York. "Parents dealing with teenagers who have drug problems get desperate, and desperate people are willing to do anything." But, he says, "the parents don't know what's really happening inside these programs; these places put up a good front. I've dealt with people who've been in these facilities who were weekend users of marijuana, moderate to small amounts. Their families were being told basically that their child was a drug addict and on the way to crack and heroin and needed their treatment program. They terrify the parents, who then turn over all parental control."

Such programs, like STRAIGHT and KIDS, are cultlike in several respects, says Markowitz.

"There's a stripping down of the client's ego structure and an attempt at brainwashing. They tell kids even after three or four years that they can't function outside and very often get them to work for very little or no pay."

The fact is, fanatical "tough-love" programs like STRAIGHT and KIDS existed long before Nancy Reagan first mouthed her infamous mantra. But the Just Say No sensibility created a kind of social petri dish where such programs could breed. Even now, as one dies, another reproduces.

Today, as the FBI checks into allegations that STRAIGHT double and triple-billed for the same health insurance claims, new centers run by former STRAIGHT staffers have opened in Georgia, Michigan and Florida, under different names.

So long as the Drug War's "carpet bombing of lies" continues, such disreputable outfits, many focusing on children for "total saturation," will persist, says Rob Steward of the Drug Policy Foundation. What's needed is education about drugs that's honest, accurate and informative to counter the hysteria that's overtaken our nation.

Unfortunately, organizations with access to the broadest audiences, like the Partnership For A Drug Free America, continue to censor important drug data and perpetuate a simplistic, black and white view of all illegal drugs. In the coming year, the Partnership's message will reach millions of more individuals. Its latest mission is to encourage regional replicas of its national campaign. New York

State, leading the nation with its \$75 million budget for drug prevention, for example, has just signed on, forming Partners For A Drug Free New York State.

While the state "has been more concerned lately with the crack epidemic and misuse of inhalants and other medicinal drugs," says Rich Hunter of the governor's Anti-Drug Abuse Council, it will air Partnership ads covering at one point or another the full spectrum of illegal drugs.