



Ambassador de Sade

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Among our president's appointments of GOP activists to important posts, we've done worse than Melvin Sembler, the Ambassador to Italy who couldn't speak Italian. Unlike the FEMA chief, who had real responsibilities, Sembler sometimes found himself a fifth wheel around his own embassy. As the *Washington Monthly* has reported, the scandal that claimed Scooter Libby's job last month may have sprung from secret Rome meetings between neocons, an Iran-Contra figure and an Italian intelligence boss who later pushed phony WMD documents -- all behind Sembler's back.

But where Melvin Sembler, 74, demands attention is as an object lesson in how cruelty can be redeemed by the transformative power of political donations. For 16 years, Sembler, with his wife Betty, directed the leading juvenile rehab business in America, STRAIGHT, Inc., before seeing it dismantled by a breathtaking array of institutional abuse claims by mid-1993. Just one of many survivors is Samantha Monroe, now a travel agent in Pennsylvania, who told *The Montel Williams* show this year about overcoming beatings, rape by a counselor, forced hunger, and the confinement to a janitor's closet in "humble pants" -- which contained weeks of her own urine, feces and menstrual blood. During this "timeout," she gnawed her cheek and spat blood at her overseers. "I refused to let them take my mind," she says of the program. The abuse took years to overcome.

"It sticks inside you," she told Williams, "it eats at your soul." She told AlterNet that she was committed at 12, in 1980, for nothing more than being caught with a mini-bar-sized liquor bottle, handed out by a classmate whose mother was a flight attendant. Samantha's mother suspected more. A STRAIGHT expert was on hand to nurture fears her daughter was a drug fiend, not to be trusted. So the small blond junior high-schooler was lured under false premises to one of the warehouse-like outposts of STRAIGHT.

Overcome by dread in the lobby, Samantha tried to run but was hauled into the back by older girls. Inside, as was standard operating procedure, she began the atonement process that cost over \$12,000 a year: all-day re-education rituals in which flapping the arms ("motivating") and chanting signaled submission to "staying straight." She was coerced, she says, into confessing to being a "druggie whore" who went down on truckers for drugs. "You're forced to confess crimes you never committed." (Some survivors call it extortion.)

Melvin Sembler stepped down earlier this year as Our Man In Rome -- he also served under the first Bush as Ambassador to Australia. Were Monroe's story unique, his STRAIGHT clinics might still be in business. Instead, his creation, which he stubbornly defends, closed in 1993 after reports of sexual abuse, beating

and stomping to boys called "faggots" for hours while being spat upon -- humiliation so bad that a Pennsylvania judge recently ruled it potentially mitigating of a Death Row sentence for a former STRAIGHT teen who committed a homophobic murder.

Although prosecutors closed the clinics, six-figure settlements sucked it dry, and state health officials yanked its licenses after media reports of teen torture and cover-up, Sembler himself escaped punishment. As one of the preeminent and hardest-working GOP fundraisers, Sembler has received the honor of living during the George W. Bush presidency at the Villa Taverna, the official residence for the U.S. ambassador, which has the largest private garden in Rome. One night in May at "The Magic Kingdom" (as Mel and Betty call it), the dining room filled with smoke from fine cigars, as the ambassador entertained Bush Sr. and an entourage -- until Betty complained that the old friends were stinking up "my house," the *Washington Post* reported.

He's come home, but still wafting across national drug policy is the influence of his STRAIGHT, which has legally changed its identity to the Drug Free America Foundation (director Calvina Fay denies it's the same organization but the name change is listed in Florida corporate filings). Subsidized by tax dollars, it lobbies for severe narcotics policies and workplace drug testing, with an advisory board that includes the like of Gov. Jeb Bush and his wife Columba, and Homeland Security Director of Public Safety Christy McCampbell. A more pressing issue is that former overseers of Sembler's company, true believers in the STRAIGHT model, are still running spin-off businesses that treat teens with the old methods.

Starting out STRAIGHT

The story begins in 1976 when Sembler, who'd made his fortune in Florida real estate, founded STRAIGHT from the ashes of The Seed -- an earlier program suspended by the U.S. Senate for tactics reminiscent, said a senator, of Communist POW camps. But as the Reagan years rolled into view, and a climate of fear nurtured a Shock and Awe approach to teens, the Semblers found a new world of acceptance for an anything-goes treatment business, meting out punishment in privately run warehouses. Endorsers from Nancy Reagan to George H.W. Bush lent their names to the program, celebrating a role model weapon in the "war on drugs."

Nine years before the elder Bush took office, Sembler was a faithful political supporter, and raising millions beginning in '79 for the Bushes' clash with Reagan for the Republican nomination. In 1988, as Bush finally accepted the GOP's nomination for president, Sembler sat in the front row. With his man in the White House, STRAIGHT would become a vehicle for purchasing eminence as a Drug War thinker. By 1988, Sembler wasn't just running the Vice President's "Team 100" soft money campaign and enjoying steak dinners with him -- he was sojourning in George and Barbara Bush's living room, briefing the candidate on drug policy. As a token of his friendship, he gave Bush a new tennis racket, receiving this note in return: "Maybe we can play at Camp David someday."

And Sembler's success grew and grew as the Clinton era spooled out. The slickly dressed go-getter smashed records as RNC Finance Chairman from 1997 to 2000, chairing the "Regents" club that accommodated such super donors as Enron's Ken

Lay to fund George W. Bush's campaign machine.

Meanwhile, a coast-to-coast trail of human wreckage had ensued during STRAIGHT's reign from 1976 to 1993 -- its survivors claimed physical, sexual and psychological trauma. The Web sites Fornits.com and TheStraights.com have collected many of their stories. Posts Kelly Caputo, an '88 alumna: "I don't think I will ever be the same. My every thought has been violated, confused, degraded and warped."

"My best guess is that at least half of the kids were abused," says Dr. Arnold Trebach, a professor emeritus at American University who created the Drug Policy Foundation to find alternatives to harsh laws. He has singled out STRAIGHT in his book "[The Great Drug War](#)" as among drug warriors' worst mistakes.

But today, Sembler's trail of purchased political friendships has led him through the opulent doors of the \$83 million "Mel Sembler Building" in Rome, christened this year with help from a longtime ally in Congress, Rep. C.W. Bill Young (R-FL). Not the palace where Sembler worked as ambassador, but another of the Eternal City's architectural treasures, built in 1927 and now dedicated as an annex to the U.S. Embassy in a \$30 million renovation at taxpayer expense. "Narcissus is now Greek and Roman," said the *Washington Post* of the monument. No one could remember any other diplomat receiving such honors, not even Benjamin Franklin.

"We don't do that, do we?" George W. Bush reportedly told the congressman, according to Congressman C.W. Bill Young 's (R-Florida) speech during the ceremony. "We don't name buildings for ambassadors where they have served."

"Mr. President," the politician replied, "I introduced the bill and you signed it." Bush may have missed the Sembler Building provision, tucked as it was into an appropriations bill. But he owed much to the longtime family friend, whom he thanked on "[The Jim Lehrer Report](#)" [RealAudio] in 2000 for raising \$21.3 million at a single dinner in April, a new record. Asked what favors the money paid for, Bush professed wonderment at the premise: "I know there's this kind of sentiment now -- I heard it during the primaries ... [that] if someone contributes to a person's campaign, there's this great sense of being beholden."

At the Sembler Building, visitors can stroll among the Italian frescoes of cherubs and heavens, and marvel at the spoils of Bush family loyalty, and meditate on the human costs that made Sembler's paradise possible.

STRAIGHT's practices

Melvin Sembler's Jekyll-and-Hyde empire appealed to parents with cheery pamphlets bearing pictures of happy and reunited families that had put their horrible pasts behind them.

Even Princess Diana had graced the clinics with a visit, celebrating STRAIGHT as a humanitarian institution. George H.W. Bush named the program among his "thousand points of light." But many called it Hell.

Taking in new kids without much discrimination -- many addiction-free -- STRAIGHT staff assured parents that a variety of troubled teens could benefit from their brand of discipline.

Vanished from home and school, the newcomer would enter the care of a "host home" overseen, at night, by the same counselors up in her face by day. Over the months, patients like Samantha Monroe earned back basic privileges like speaking or, in the distant future, going to the bathroom alone, without an ever-present minder's thumb in the belt loop -- literally. The counselors were themselves STRAIGHT kids, who had been molded into drug warriors in the heat of humiliation. They'd learned to play along and join the winning side, becoming the hall monitors and the muscle that enforced the rules.

From the outset, STRAIGHT's method was on thin ice with regulators. The underpinnings had long struck critics as more Pyongyang than Pinellas County. Sembler took his blueprint from another St. Petersburg program, The Seed, in which his son had enrolled in the 1970s. The Senate was less impressed than Sembler with The Seed. Senator Sam Ervin, who'd brought down Richard Nixon, killed the program's federal subsidies for funding a method "similar to the highly refined 'brainwashing' techniques employed by the North Koreans." Ervin's 1974 probe into the rise of treatment abuse articulated an admirable American ideal: that "if our society is to remain free, one man must not be empowered to change another's personality and dictate the values, thoughts and feelings of another." Sembler had other ideals in mind, as hundreds of STRAIGHT victims would later attest.

Finally, one by one, the 12 clinics, which had once formed a nine-state empire, went dark. Much of the money was lost in settlements, but jury verdicts offered a peek into the regularity of the abuses. Florida patient Karen Norton was awarded \$721,000 by a jury after being thrown against a wall in 1982 by the Semblers' treatment guru of choice: Dr. Miller Newton, whose unaccredited Ph.D was in public administration, but was tapped by the Semblers as STRAIGHT National Clinical Director. He's emblematic of how the creature Sembler built just won't stop sprouting heads, having personally launched spinoff businesses with names like KIDS. As a result, Newton has paid out over \$12 million to his victims. Having moved back to Florida, he now calls himself "Friar Cassian," a priest in the non-Catholic Antiochian Orthodox church.

But just last month, Betty Sembler testified in a case against a STRAIGHT critic that Miller Newton, the dark cleric of rehab, is "a very close and dear friend and a valued one," and an "outstanding individual." Had he committed outrageous acts? "Absolutely not," she said, adding that it was incomprehensible that ex-STRAIGHT teen Richard Bradbury was picketing Newton. Thanks to her judgment of character, Newton has been given a voice in national drug policy, listed as a participant in a Drug Free America Foundation "International Scientific and Medical Forum."

From the beginning, critics were shocked to find that the keepers freely acknowledged many of the tactics -- yet insisted they were necessary. Mel Sembler even seems to have been emboldened by painful questions about his clinics. "We've got nothing to hide -- we're saving lives," he said in 1977 after six directors quit over practices that included kicking a restrained youth. He remained closely involved in

personnel management. Almost two decades later, recalling how the ACLU was furious about STRAIGHT's practices, Sembler told *Florida Trend Magazine* in 1997 -- "with a grin," the reporter wrote -- that "it just shows that we must have been doing things right."

And rather than clean up Florida's program, he apparently leaned on health inspectors in 1989 to go easy on it. Reports of a cover-up wouldn't emerge for four more years -- long years, for the teenagers committed to a program that wouldn't lose its license until 1993. STRAIGHT foe Bradbury, believing he'd been "brainwashed" into becoming an abusive counselor, brought the clinics to the attention of the state after years of protest. Inspector Lowell Clary of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services found that reports of illegally restrained and stomped-on teens had been swept under the rug, likely with help from Republican state senators, who went unnamed, but made phone calls urging the clinic stayed open. A "persistent foul odor" hung over this use of power, said a *St. Petersburg Times* Op-Ed applauding the death of STRAIGHT.

"While at the facility," wrote Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services Acting Inspector General Lowell Clary on May 19, 1993, "the team [of inspectors in 1989] received a phone call informing them that no matter what they found, STRAIGHT would receive their license." "If you do anything other than what I tell you on this issue, I will fire you on the spot," an HRS official was told. Clary wasn't positive, but evidence suggested that "pressure may have been generated by Ambassador Sembler and other state senators."

By now, Clinton was in office. Four years earlier, while young "druggies" were still being restrained to chairs for 12 hours, denied medication and sent to the hospital with injuries, the 1989 report would have tarnished President George H.W. Bush's "points of light." Bush had designated STRAIGHT an American treasure. On that fragile premise, not one but two STRAIGHT presidents had been named ambassadors in 1989, the year of the Florida inspection. Sembler got the Australian assignment. The other post sent co-founder Joseph Zappala to Spain armed for diplomacy with a high school education. The two were mocked in *People* as "too hick to hack it." They'd clowned around during the nomination process, turning in nearly identical answers on Senate disclosure forms. In the "languages spoken" box Sembler had written, humorously, "English (fluent)."

That took real cheek. These two pranksters had been leaders of a group characterized as a destructive cult by top authorities on cult abuse ranging from Steve Hassan of the Freedom Of Mind Center to the late Dr. Margaret Singer of UC Berkeley, an expert on the abuse of American servicemen in the Korean War whose expert testimony was used to close a facility in Cincinnati. Bradbury, the whistleblower, concurs, saying the program modified his personality into something monstrous. Bradbury attended the St. Petersburg, Florida clinic. "You don't understand what they did to these kids," Bradbury told AlterNet. "They put stuff up my butt."

But you wouldn't know from Sembler's State Department biography that his claim to fame has such a shoddy legal record. The program has the honor of being described as a "remarkable program" in his bio, and it credits STRAIGHT with saving 12,000

kids. The ambassador did not return attempts to contact him during the reporting for this story, and declined the author's interview requests last year through a U.S. Embassy spokesman.

In addition to receiving a second Ambassadorship from the second Bush president, his Governor Jeb Bush named August 8, 2000, "Betty Sembler Day" for her "work protecting children from the dangers of drugs," labeling her "ambassadorable." The next year, at a drug policy conference in Florida, a writer from the Canadian legalization magazine *Cannibis Culture* asked her about the STRAIGHT victims. "They should get a life," he quotes her as replying. "There's nothing to apologize for. The [drug] legalizers are the ones who should be apologizing."

The ambassador's wife is an outspoken critic of what she calls "medical excuse marijuana," and serves on the boards of such mighty anti-legalization campaigns as the International Task Force On Strategic Drug Policy, which works with Latin American countries to lobby for harsh drug laws. Mel himself used his Rome ambassadorial pulpit for a global conference in 2003, appealing to the "moral imperatives" of the drug war and urging a "culture of disapproval of drug abuse." DFAF, founded by the Semblers, receives hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants from the Small Business Association to advance workplace drug testing in businesses -- for example, a handout in 2000 of \$314,000. Betty Sembler is president and Melvin has served as chairman.

STRAIGHT's Spin-offs

Though Sembler's clinics were shuttered, the spirit of STRAIGHT lives on as a flourishing model for drug rehabilitation. That includes offshoots run by former STRAIGHT staff, such as the Orlando STRAIGHT spin-off, SAFE, which was described by 16-year-old Leah Marchessault in 2000 as "something from the Twilight Zone" in a report by Florida's WAMI TV station.

Leah had gone to visit her sister, in for heroin abuse, only to be told she herself was a "druggie" -- sound familiar? And when Leah fled, she was pinned against a wall and assaulted by a pack of nine women members who forced her to undergo a full-body search. Another girl told WAMI of being "forced to stand for about an hour and a half, the attention being focused on me, and about every 10 minutes I was told how I was full of crap, how I needed to be flushed out."

Despite their cheery names -- SAFE in Orlando, Florida; Kids Helping Kids of Cincinnati, Ohio; Growing Together of Lake Worth, Florida -- these barely regulated warehouses cry out for oversight. Hungry for recruits, they appeal to the fears of parents by warning a child will die on the streets if uncorrected by their methods.

In the TV report, the presence of a spokeswoman named Loretta Parrish was evidence that SAFE was the child of STRAIGHT -- she'd been the local STRAIGHT's marketing director until 1992, when the old company closed under state scrutiny, and SAFE, a new company, almost immediately sprang up to replace it. A new head for the hydra: Parrish didn't dispute the visiting sister's horrifying experience, but called it necessary, as if explaining something obvious to her since

the '80s.

"Yes we do require that," said Parrish. "And if they don't, then they have to remove the other child. This is a family treatment program. And unless the entire family is in treatment, it doesn't work."

"We do not do a strip search that is different from any other treatment program," she adds, and later described the teens and moms attacking SAFE as "a coalition of cockroaches." Gov. Jeb Bush even endorsed SAFE in a letter he wrote as "a valuable tool."

And so with the former STRAIGHT bosses rich in Republican honors, and insulated in a political Xanadu not unlike the alternate reality field engulfing the White House, a new generation of teenagers is going under the hammer, as an old generation of victims finds cold comfort for their own suffering. If this is the compassionate kind of conservatism, how harsh the other variety must be.

John Gorenfeld, a freelance writer in San Francisco, will be blogging further details of this story at gorenfeld.net/john.

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