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Brisbane-based Natalie Raynes*, 23, grew up in the religious cult The Children of God. She tells how she was:

- Raped from the age of two
- Once made to stay mute for a period of three months
- Abused, beaten and starved, even while pregnant

“ I WAS BORN IN NEW Delhi, India, in 1982. We moved around the world

a lot. The cult was always on the run from something. My earliest memory is of when I was two or three years old – the age when Children of God disciples are ready to ‘receive Jesus’. We were sharing a house in Austria by then – my brothers, sisters, my parents, assorted cult members and I. I remember being led into a room and made to repeat words of a prayer that asked Jesus to forgive my sins and come into my heart. I don’t remember many details but I know I tried to run away and hide. We were always being told that we were the chosen ones and that other people who didn’t believe were evil.

Once you ‘receive Jesus’, the Children of God believe you’re old enough to masturbate and have sexual relations. Sex is their way of sharing the love of God with each other – even through rape. When I was three years old, the older cult members performed an exorcism on me for being ‘possessed.’ I was terrified. I sat in the middle of a dark room with people around me ranting, raving, speaking in tongues and



“ I survived a RAPE CULT ”

banging their fists on the floor. ‘The demons aren’t yielding,’ they shouted. I felt so small, scared and pressured into trying to please them by helping release the demons. I didn’t want to get my family into trouble.

The first time I remember being molested was at age four or five in one of the cult’s ‘teen

homes’. A teenage boy tugged on my nightie and pulled me into bed with him. He started touching me ‘down there’ and made me touch him – he told me he was going to teach me how a man and woman made love. I had that yucky feeling in my stomach, but I knew I’d be beaten if I complained.

Our days were spent working for the commune. First, we’d have Devotions – two hours of reading the cult’s pornographic literature and singing freaky songs – then breakfast, which consisted of food donated by companies that thought the cult was a charity. Sometimes it was only water and porridge. After ▶

◀ that it was 'Jesus Job Time', which meant doing everything from cleaning the toilets to doing the dishes for up to 200 people.

Most weeks we would have to go out and sell posters, videos and tapes that were made by the cult. There was no school and by the age of 10 or 11 we were considered old enough to look after the younger kids.

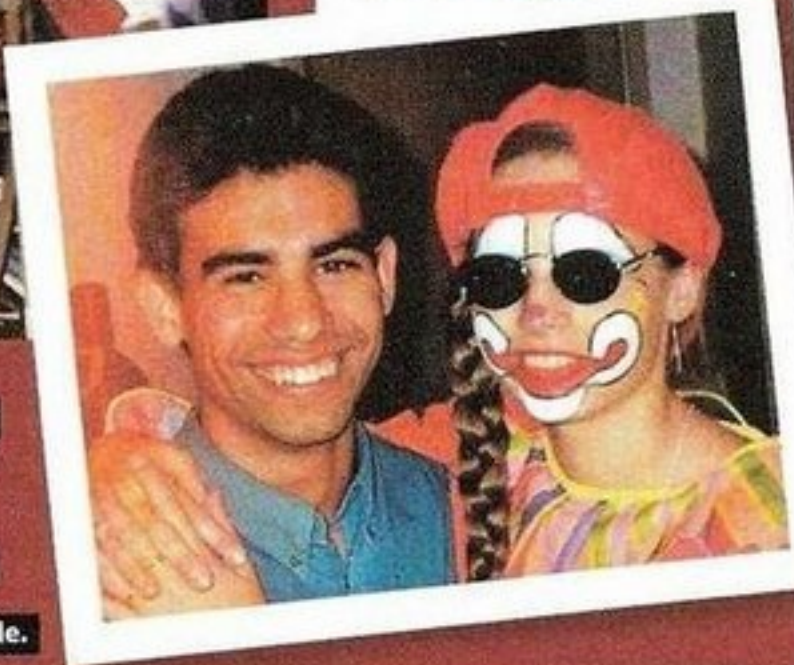
At nine I was sent to a 'Victor Camp', which was like a concentration camp for the cult's rebellious kids. I thought there'd be lots of other kids, but it was just me and one other boy. We were badly beaten, drilled with cult doctrines around the clock and made to clean up after everybody else. I was also on a 'silence restriction', so I was forbidden to speak one word for three months or more.

I felt like there must have been something terribly wrong with me and that I was definitely going to go to hell because I didn't like people touching me. I worried I wasn't brave enough to die as a martyr for Jesus, like we were supposed to.

I spent periods of time living apart from my parents. A lot of the parents were in denial about the abuse that went on. I felt confused and angry at the leaders for sending my dad away so he couldn't protect us, and even though my mum was usually in the same home as us, we never got to see her.

I felt physically sick a lot of the time – and confused about the life I had – but I didn't know anything different. There were no opportunities to interact with outsiders. If someone touched you, you had no choice but to let them or they'd abuse you or a person you cared about in front of you, which was even worse.

By the time I was 10, we were living in Poland. I was being abused by someone every single



Clockwise from left: Natalie as a child; Natalie aged 15, (around the time she met her husband); Natalie and Ricky Rodriguez, grandson of the cult's founder, who eventually committed suicide.

day. They'd shove fingers inside me or else get me to 'pleasure' them (as they called it). They didn't believe in condoms and when you started your period they stopped having intercourse with you, but still did everything else. The cult also didn't believe in doctors so I'm very lucky that I never got an STI.

I met my ex-husband at a Children of God camp in Russia when I was 14. Straight away I got a funny vibe from him. He had obviously decided he had a thing for me because when he first came to visit my parents, he ended up living with us. He

promised them he'd never sleep with me while I was underage but he did and abused me in every other way. He made me feel I was so ugly and useless that no one could ever love me. I cried a lot but he'd just tell me to shut up or smack me until I did.

At 16, my husband got me drunk enough to pass out and when I came to he was raping me. That was the night my son was conceived. He wanted me to have an abortion but he wouldn't pay for it, so instead threatened to 'beat it out of me', and made me run and drink a lot to get rid of it. He wouldn't feed me when I was

hungry; he said it was 'in my head'. He told me I was fat and ugly. When I told him I was going to stop drinking and exercising because I didn't want to hurt my baby, he relented, saying he didn't want to father a retard.

During the rest of my pregnancy I felt stronger because I would soon have someone who could possibly love me. I was sad because I knew my baby's father would never really care about him, but I no longer cared what my husband did to me.

I gained the strength to leave him once but he talked me out of it by threatening suicide. We moved to Texas to have the baby and he promised we'd leave the cult, but wherever we went we always seemed to be involved with them. I felt cornered and trapped; like I was running but going nowhere.

At 17, I came to Australia for a visit and gained the courage to leave my husband and the cult. It's been over four years since I left him, but he still won't leave me and my son alone. But I have a good life thanks to the kindness of the people around us.

My parents are no longer involved with the cult, and they've supported my decision to leave my husband and speak out. I would never have made it out if not for all the help from outsiders, so thank you all."

As told to Lucille Howe **COSMO**

THE FAMILY: A GLOBAL AFFAIR

- The Children of God, also known as The Family, was founded by American evangelist preacher David Berg in 1968. He fled the US and led many of his followers to Europe after being charged with kidnapping, assault and immorality in 1973/4.
- Police raided a Family home in Argentina and found 268 abused children plus literature promoting sex between adults and children and videos of parents having sex with their children.

- A police raid on the Australian chapter of The Family in 1992 placed 40 children in custody because of abuse.
- The website www.movingon.org has been set up to help former cult members deal with the abuse they suffered and to move on from it.

The cult's literature was pornographic.

