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A Hand Up, Not A Hand Out

Sept 19 - Oct 10 2007
Issue 61 Vol 3

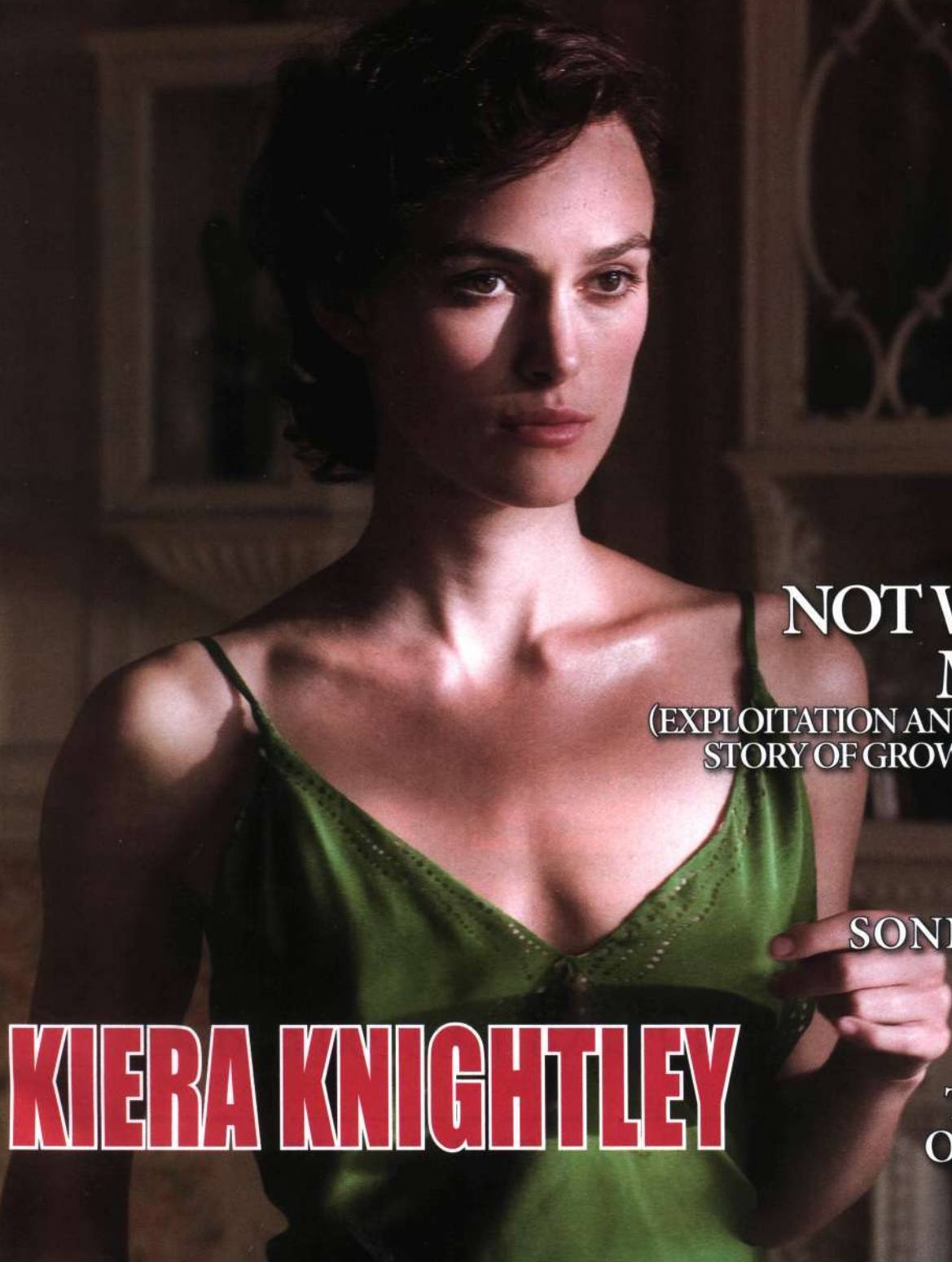


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Ireland's Issues 30 Gardiner place, Dublin 1. Phone 8735137. e-mail issuesmag@iolfree.ie

Dublin Office:

Phone: 01 8735137 Fax: 01 8735143

Belfast for magazines contact

Dublin 01 8735137.

Limerick Distribution Centre

John Noonan

9, Lower Gerald Griffin Street

Phone: 087 7812365

Cork Distribution Centre:

Ger Power Phone: 086 3503519

Editor: Sean Kavanagh **01 8735137**

Advertising: Michael Harmon **01 8745968**

Ireland's Issues,

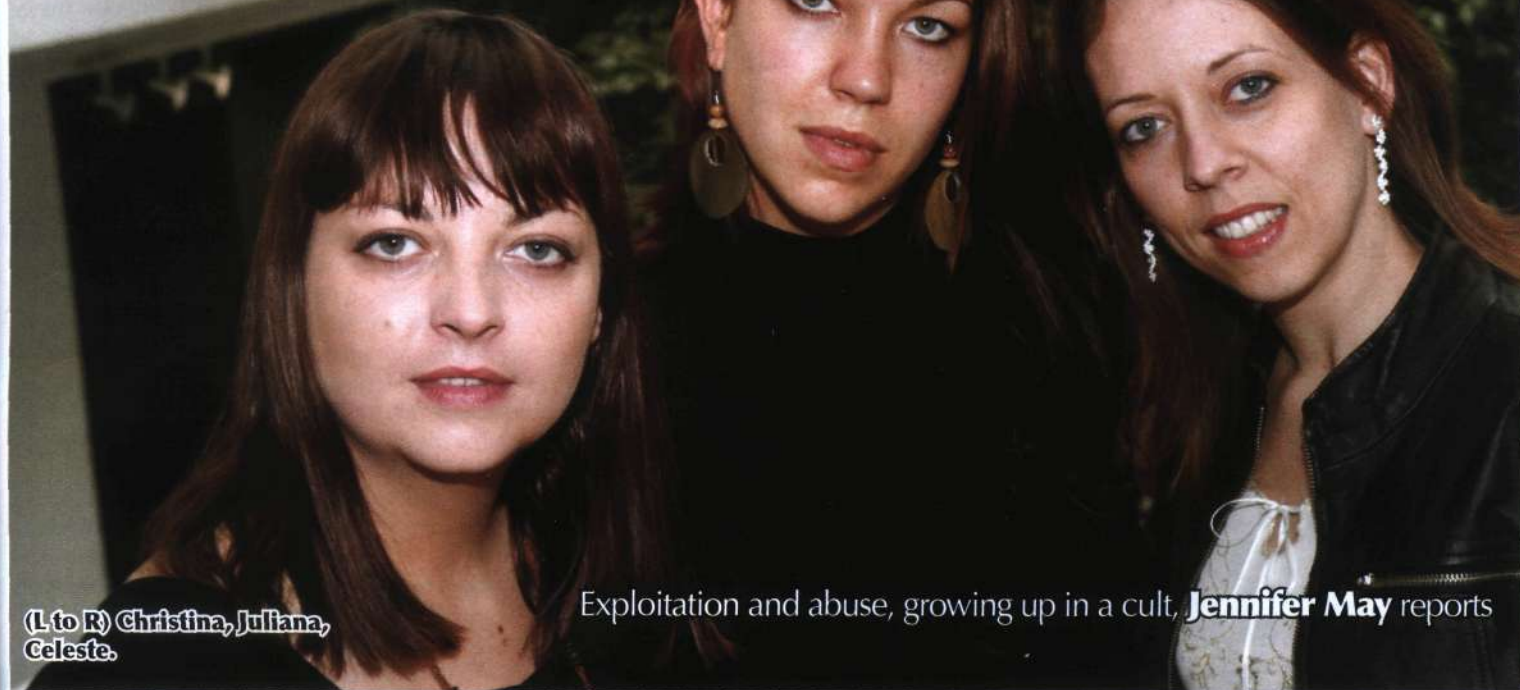
30 Gardiner Place, Dublin 1

email: issuesmag@iolfree.ie

Printing: Boylan Print

Circulation: 30,000 Every 3 Weeks

NOT WITHOUT MY SISTER



(L to R) Christina, Juliana, Celeste.

Exploitation and abuse, growing up in a cult, **Jennifer May** reports

'I always wished to fly. I used to stare up at the sky from the confines of the cult commune walls and imagine growing wings and flying away. Perhaps for this reason I would always climb to the highest point I could find, be it a tree, balcony, water tank or roof, so I could see the world beyond four walls and imagine myself there.' **Juliana Buhring.**

Juliana Buhring is a remarkable woman. After years of enforced silence she found the strength to speak out about the horrific physical, sexual and psychological abuses she and her siblings suffered within the confines of the Children Of God, a cult she was brought up in from birth. Juliana is now a voice for all the other voiceless children caught, like her, in the hellish nightmare of cult living.

The Children of God (now known as the Family International or TFI), was founded in Huntington Beach, California in the 1960's, as an off-shoot of the Jesus Movement. Founder David (Moses) Berg preached a bizarre mixture of religion based on salvation, apocalypticism and a spiritual revolution against the outside world; where all were considered evil. He also believed that one way of showing your love of God was through sex and the 'sharing' of ones bodies with other members indiscriminately – tragically the children unlucky enough to be part of this 'religion' were also expected to partake in these rituals.

Juliana's father, Chris Jones, joined the movement, which has communes in many different

countries (including Ireland), as a young man and married his first wife Rebecca, also a cult member, when she was seventeen. Rebecca had three children, but after the birth of her son David, became depressed and left the movement bringing two of her children with her. Her eldest daughter Celeste – Juliana's half sister – was left behind.

The camps were huge – often with more than 200 children, and there was widespread sexual abuse of the children from a young age.

Chris then fell in love with Serena, a young German woman and in 1981 Juliana was born into cult life in the Philippines.

'My sisters and I were never members of the Children of God,' Juliana is quick to clarify. 'We never had a choice – it was just forced upon us.'

One of her earliest memories is of being separated from her mother, which would be a devastating blow for any child, but in such an unnatural environment, catastrophic.

'My mother became ill,' explains Juliana. 'She had a hereditary illness, but it was seen by lead-

ers as a 'spiritual sickness'. She was forced to leave the Phillipines and sent back to Germany, as she was considered a bad influence; it was terrible for her to leave her husband and child, but she had no choice.'

Juliana was then moved to a series of children's 'training camps', where harsh army-like discipline was practised, and the children were regularly beaten into conformity.

'We children were brainwashed to believe that we were the 'pure generation', the ones who would run the world when Jesus would return in 1993,' explains Juliana. 'We grew up believing that we would never grow into adulthood, that we were martyrs – Berg was training us to be the 'perfect models'.'

The camps were huge – often with more than 200 children, and there was widespread sexual abuse of the children from a young age.

'Berg preached the Law of Love and even children were considered sexual beings,' remembers Juliana. 'He contorted scripture to suit his own paedophilic tendencies. We were taught how to have sex, how to perform with each other. There were 'sharing schedules' – I grew up equating affection or hugging with sex.'

Although she had never known any other life, Juliana instinctively questioned her existence, saying that she felt frustrated, disillusioned and very alone. She became deeply depressed. Her relationship with her father didn't help matters. Knowing she was unhappy and that she wanted to leave the group, he put pressure on her, with-

holding his love and affection; expressing his disappointment in her for rebelling.

'The strong ones were always the first to be beaten down; I ended up living in fear of the next blow. I felt there was no point in living, so in my early teens I tried suicide twice. I stopped talking, became anorexic. I could see the injustices around me, but could do nothing, so my anger turned onto myself.'

Juliana had never met her half-sister Kristina and had only sporadic meetings with Celeste over the years, but by the time she was living with the cult in Uganda she had five younger brothers and sisters, all of whom needed her support.

'I had to look after my younger siblings. My brother wanted to take his own life when he was only ten,' she recalls. 'I stayed to protect them as best I could.'

Eventually Juliana realised that she could no longer sustain life within the cult. Quietly she began to prepare for her escape. Then one day she got up and walked out, never to go back. This was a huge step for someone who had been taught to view everything on the outside as evil; who had no idea what was waiting for her in the real world:

'I had no tools for survival, no education,

records, money,' Juliana remembers. 'We were always told that the family at worst was better than life outside at best' and other scare stories, and of course you believed them. Leaving was like jumping off a cliff or arriving on an alien planet.'

Amazingly within a month of her escape, Juliana had learned to drive and found decent employment.

More importantly, she built up important powerful contacts in Uganda, which ensured (once she did not speak negatively about the cult) that her father would allow her contact with her younger siblings. She also started writing her story, which for her was an important self-therapy.

'I started writing my story as a way of discovering who I was – that I was not a cult personality – for me it was like a form of detox.'

Being re-united with her sisters Celeste and Kristina in 2005 was an important turning point for Juliana, and the three sisters swapped their experiences, merging their three different lives into one story within the pages of a book, 'Not Without My Sister'. Within four months there was a book deal and Juliana made the decision to move from Uganda and set up home in England, where she is involved with a charity, Rise International.

Their aim is to raise awareness with governments, charities and organizations over the dangers children face growing up in cults. They also campaign for justice for those abused in cults and champion the rights of children as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

And what of the cult now?

The publication of literature, photographs and videos advocating and documenting adult-child sex by the Children of God, led to a series of investigations into the organization in the 1980's. After the death of Berg in 1994, TFI, now controlled by his wife Karen Zerby, admitted that there had been abuses between the 70's and 80's, but the group says they have now renounced these practices.

'I would still be concerned about children involved with TFI,' says Juliana. 'There is no firm child protection policy in place – if children report an abuse they are forced to leave the group. The same paedophiles are still running the organization so of course there are concerns – children have no proper education, no medical care, no rights.'

And sadly for all the victims during those years (of which there could be thousands) there has been no acknowledgement, no apology and no reparation.

It may seem incredible, that there have been no prosecutions, but Juliana points out the myriad of problems with trying to take a

'He contorted scripture to suit his own paedophilic tendencies. We were taught how to have sex.'

KRISTINA, CELESTE AND JULIANA

Not Without My Sister

The true story of three girls violated and betrayed



case to court:

'The cult operated all over the third world,' she points out. 'In many of these countries you can get away with murder. How where do you prosecute? Members often use pseudonyms so this makes it even more difficult. Many of these crimes would also be covered by the statute of limitations (ie: they can not be prosecuted because they happened too long ago)– these are some of the issues we are trying to deal with within Rise International.'

Juliana now has no contact with her father who disowned her as soon as she spoke out against the cult. But she is not letting anything stand in her way. Not only is Juliana working with Rise but she is also studying for a BA in Philosophy, proving that with bravery and determination it is possible to move on from even the most terrible abuses.

'I don't use the past as an excuse not to succeed,' she smiles. 'If I did then they (the cult) have won.'

'Besides', she reiterates. 'You can't appreciate freedom until you've been in prison your whole life.'

Juliana Buhning has definitely learned to fly!

The Family International now describes itself as a 'Christian Fellowship' and has 4,000 children and 4,000 adult members who live across 100 countries in 718 communal houses.

Juliana and her sisters' book 'Not Without My Sister –The True Story of Three Girls Violated and Betrayed By Those They trusted' is in all good bookshops now.

Taken in Sri Lanka, Simon Peter and Serena, Serena holds Juliana, Marianna stands between her parents, Celeste is next to her father.

