

FOR GOD'S SAKE

When police removed more than 400 children from a Polygamist compound in the United States last month amid allegations of sexual and physical abuse, the world looked on in disbelief. Many would be unaware that in the late 1980s a religious sect operated brutal brainwashing camps in Macau where child sexual abuse was common.

BY DONNA PAGE | PHOTOS BY RUI RASQUINHO E INÉS CAMPOS ALVES



Group of girls rescued from the Yearn for Zion Ranch



Yearn for Zion Ranch, Eldorado, Texas

It has been twenty years since John* lived in Macau and he has no plans to ever return. The 34-year-old suffers nightmares and still has trouble sleeping. He hears children crying, sees their anguished faces and remembers all too well their unanswered pleas for help.

"It is a part of my history that I would much rather forget, but it is one of those things that I will never be able to forget," John explains. "If I could wake up tomorrow and it was erased I would be a much happier person. I am not afraid for myself anymore, but I do fear for other children."

John was born into the religious sect Children of God (COG), also known as The Family, that is widely reported to have condoned sexual, mental and physical abuse of children, partner swapping, orgies and at times polygamy. He spent several months in a COG detention centre in Macau designed to "re-educate" teens who questioned the teachings of the group's leaders. John explains that after expressing negative views of the sect and its "pedophile teachings", he was taken from his parents and moved

to Macau. Treatment in the Macau camps was described in a British custody court ruling in 1995 by Lord Justice Alan Hylton Ward as "a form of torture" and "barbaric and cruel".

John has been keeping up with the news last month about police removing 416 children from the remote Yearn for Zion ranch, in Texas, run by the fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. A polygamist sect, authorities claim it has a culture of sex between young girls and much older men. John says he has been praying the charges are wrong, as he has seen "that type of damage first hand and the children never fully recover".

The Texas sect split from mainstream Mormons when polygamy was banned. In what is now the largest child custody case in United States history, the state Department of Child Protective Services is seeking to strip the children's parents of custody and place them in foster homes or up for adoption. The group holds that plural marriage is a way to get to heaven. Investigators testified in court last month that they found

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES SUPERVISOR ANGIE VOSS TOLD THE US COURT LAST MONTH THAT A "CULTURE OF YOUNG GIRLS BEING PREGNANT BY OLDER MEN" PLACED ALL THE CHILDREN AT RISK. THE GIRLS, SHE SAID, WERE IN DANGER OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE BOYS WERE BEING "GROOMED" TO BECOME PERPETRATORS.



FLDS temple site at Yearn for Zion Ranch, Eldorado, Texas

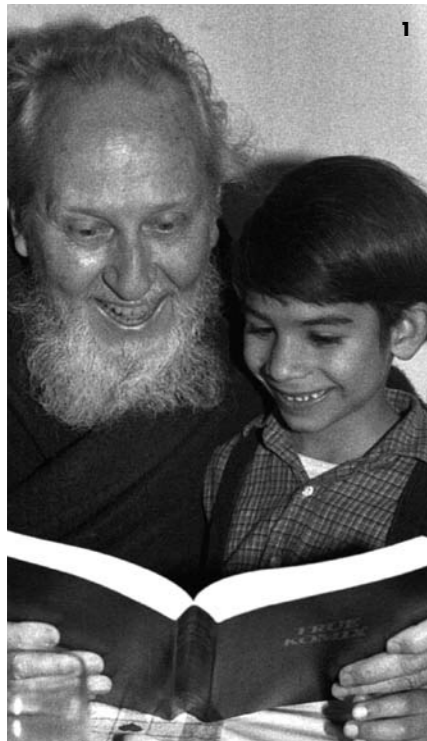
THE RANCH WAS PURCHASED IN 2003 AND BUILT BY WARREN JEFFS, THE SELF-DESCRIBED PROPHET OF THE GROUP, WHO WAS CONVICTED LAST YEAR BY A UTAH COURT ON TWO COUNTS OF BEING AN ACCOMPLICE TO RAPE, RELATING TO THE MARRIAGE OF A SCHOOLGIRL AGAINST HER WILL TO A COUSIN. HE IS SERVING A 10 YEARS-TO-LIFE PRISON SENTENCE AND IS AWAITING TRIAL ON SIMILAR CHARGES IN ARIZONA.

a household inside the compound with 22 wives for one man, another with a 13-year-old mother and a third where a 17-year-old girl was married to a 46-year-old man. The ranch was purchased in 2003 and built by Warren Jeffs, the self-described prophet of the group, who was convicted last year by a Utah court on two counts of being an accomplice to rape, relating to the marriage of a schoolgirl against her will to a cousin. He is serving a 10 years-to-life prison sentence and is awaiting trial on similar charges in Arizona.

Child Protective Services supervisor Angie Voss told the US court last month that a "cul-

ture of young girls being pregnant by older men" placed all the children at risk. The girls, she said, were in danger of sexual abuse and the boys were being "groomed" to become perpetrators.

John says a similar raid was carried out in Australia in 1992 on remote COG properties where 128 children were taken from their parents. There were allegations of children engaging in sexual activities and physical abuse. The raid was an international story and its aftermath - a two-year legal wrangle that, ultimately, brought about no charges against the group. John says while authorities around the world have had



1,2,3 Ricky Rodriguez (aka Davidito) was considered the adopted son of COG leader David Berg and his likely successor. He committed suicide in January 2005, after recording a video message detailing sexual abuse inflicted on him as a child. In the process he killed a close associate of his mother, Karen Zerby, who is the current leader of The Family.

4 In 1992, Ben Farnsworth, a boy raised in the group's compound in Macau, jumped from a building to his death in Hong Kong.

5 Jonathan Berg (also known as Hosea) was in charge of the Victor Program in Macau. In 1973, he and his sister Faith had a meeting with Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi.

6 Merry Berg, seen here with a lawyer, was punished for dissent by her grandfather and sent to Macau where she stayed locked in a room for months.

7 Kathy Farrell was the supervisor of the Teen Detention Centre in Macau.

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little success prosecuting COG, he has been witness to the abuse carried out on young children.

"I saw it and suffered through it, there has been a lot of talk about how it was just a few rogue members and the behavior was not condoned by the organization," he says. "It's just not true, I was there and we were sent there [to Macau] to be abused until we fell into line and behaved the way they wanted us to. Things may have changed now, but many of the leaders of the group are still around so we are left to wonder how much has changed."

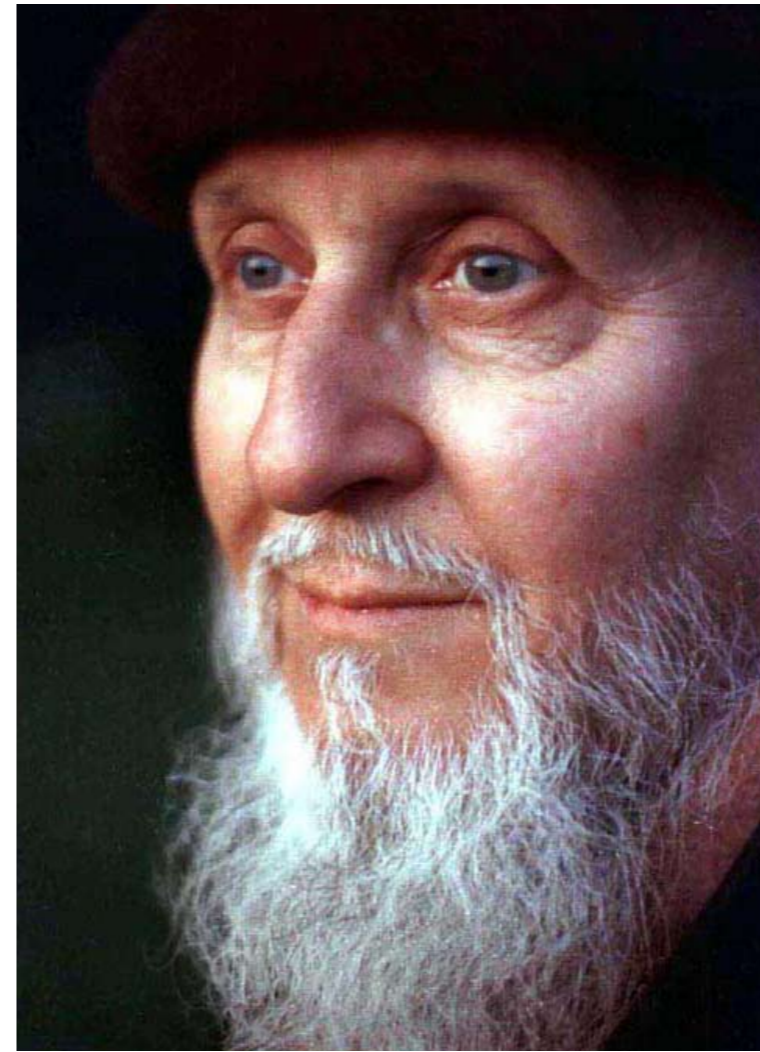
John's parents were members of COG which

was founded in 1968 by 50-year-old David Berg, who was also known as Moses David, Dad or Mo. Former musician Jeremy Spencer of Fleetwood Mac joined the group in 1972. Actors Rose McGowan and River Phoenix, who died of a drug overdose in 1993, grew up in the cult.

Berg, described by many as "charismatic", was kicked out as pastor of a Christian Missionary Alliance church in Arizona, in 1951, on suspicion of sexual misconduct and started his move away from traditional Christian orthodoxy. John says what Berg was selling in the late 1960s, that the corrupt modern world was doomed and only

Jesus could lead a Christian revolution, was irresistible to hundreds of young people, including his parents. He describes his parents and other group members as "hippies" who were looking for an alternative way of life. They found it in Berg and went on to stay in the cult for decades. John chooses not to talk in too much detail about his family as he says they have moved on and are now happy. "It took a long time but my parents, like many other members finally realised what it was all about," he says. "They got out and have no interest in the group at all now."

Alberta University's Professor Stephen Kent researches new and alternative religions, including COG, and has carried out in-depth interviews with many former members. According to Professor Kent by the early 1980s there were many teens, children of the initial converts commonly referred to as the "second generation", expressing objections to the group's views and practices. Many were having grave doubts about following in their parent's footsteps and were vocal about it. In an effort to combat the dissent,



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COG leadership started camps around the world to heighten commitment to founder, Berg, and his directives. Berg's son Hosea was in charge of the Teen Detention Centre established in Macau in the late 1980s and later took leadership of the Macau Victor Program. The centres were located in Hac Sa Village, Coloane, near Fernando's. The first dealt with the children of the cult's leadership and the second, were John was sent, was open to children of ordinary members. Teens who expressed alternate views to COG's leadership or had a "bad attitude" were taken from their families to be "re-educated". Centres were called vic-

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MO

The group

The Children of God was formed in 1968 by Californian preacher David Berg, later known as Moses David or just Mo. His teachings are paramount in the sect and his spoken and written words regarded as sacred. Berg died in 1994. Berg - whose sect for many years promoted indiscriminate sex among its members, including its children - was a fugitive since September 1993, when Argentine officials asked Interpol to track him down and detain him for inciting child abuse and other crimes. He died in 1994 and was buried in Costa de Caparica, Portugal. When Berg died his longtime partner Karen Zerby, also known as Maria and Queen Maria, took control of the group which is now known as The Family. According to the groups' website there are now 10,000 full-time and associate adult volunteer members working from 1100 centers or communities, situated in over 100 countries.

Operation

Despite several departures from this policy over the years, the sect primarily believes in communal living and that those outside the group are in need of help. People not part of The Family are known as "Systemites" and the outside world is known as "The System". The group believes it must live in isolation and protect itself and its children from the outside world. Many of its members home-school their children, while others who live in larger communities have established their own small schools. The group has used many names, including The Children of God, The Family, The Family of Love and the Family International. It tried to distance itself from the name Children of God around 1978 due to bad publicity linked to promiscuous sex and child abuse. The group believes wholly in the teachings of Berg and structures its everyday life on the volumes of literature prepared by leaders of the group. During his life Berg wrote more than 3000 booklets known as Mo Letters.

Image

The group sees itself as the chosen people, as the children of God. It believes itself superior to the "System" and those in "the System", and that the main purpose of its members is to reproduce to ensure the continuation of the cult. It describes itself as a Christian fellowship designed to share God's word and love. The Children of God has been outlawed in some countries such as the Philippines for extreme practices, including allegations of sexual, physical and psychological abuse of children. It claimed a victory in the 1991 Mount Pinatubo volcanic eruption in the Philippines, saying the Lord sent the disaster because the country had rejected the group.

Leadership

Members are answerable only to sect leadership and must abide by the rules and regulations of the group. Punishment is meted out to the children by sect leaders. The sect does not consider itself answerable to the laws of "the System" but usually abides by them to avoid drawing publicity to itself. Facing problems in the 1980s with teenagers born into the group questioning its teaching and operations, the group set up a host of "re-education" centres, including two in Macau, designed to assist these "wayward" youths to conform. Many youths who spent time in these Teen Detention Centres have spoken publicly of being sexually, physically and mentally abused.

The beginning

The Children of God was started by Berg in the late 1960s and many young hippies flocked to its promise of free love and communal living. But its doctrines became more bizarre in the 1970s, particularly with the practice of "flirty fishing", trying to bring new members to the sect by sleeping with them, thus allowing them to share the love of Jesus. Many female members worked in brothels and were regarded as spreading God's word to their clients and were encouraged to give their takings to the group.



tor programs, signifying the hope that those who entered the program would be able to gain a “victory” over personal problems. John says there was little schooling besides “brainwashing techniques and evil spirit purging”.

In Lord Justice Ward’s 1995 judgment the camps were described as existing “for the purpose of changing the children and shaping their lives in order to mould them to The Family’s image. The cost to the children was to rob them of their personal identity. It was an invasion of personal freedom”.

Justice Ward went on to say that “what was happening in Macau deeply disturbs me”. “The truth is that these children were there to have their spirits broken by whatever means it took, and loving kindness was not the primary means deployed,” he said. “Freedom of thought was a crime for which DR [a witness] was banished to Macau. Freedom of thought was beaten out of her in Macau. Though DR lives on, the spirit of a young girl died in Macau. It is time The Family faced that truth.”

John says teenagers were made to write down or tell leaders about their feelings

and were then subjected to regular beatings and punishment. He says they were hit with paddles, forced to do hard labour, put in solitary confinement and many were sexually abused. “I don’t like to go back there in my mind at all,” he says. “There are a lot of painful memories that I would rather not discuss.”

Berg’s granddaughter Merry Berg (known as Mene in the cult) was sent to Macau in 1987, aged 14, after expressing disappointment in her grandfather’s teachings. In a letter published on exfamily.org, a website run by former COG members, Merry wrote that at first she was totally in awe of Berg and greatly respected him as the “prophet of God for the End time” and her “loving grandfather”. After going to live with him when she was 11, she became disillusioned at his “uncontrolled drinking and alcoholism, and his perverted sexual desires and practices”. Merry is one of at least six women, including Berg’s daughter, daughter-in-law and another granddaughter who have publicly alleged Berg sexually abused them when they were children.

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“I SAW IT AND SUFFERED THROUGH IT, THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF TALK ABOUT HOW IT WAS JUST A FEW ROGUE MEMBERS AND THE BEHAVIOR WAS NOT CONDONED BY THE ORGANIZATION,” HE SAYS. “IT’S JUST NOT TRUE, I WAS THERE AND WE WERE SENT THERE [TO MACAU] TO BE ABUSED UNTIL WE FELL INTO LINE AND BEHAVED THE WAY THEY WANTED US TO. THINGS MAY HAVE CHANGED NOW, BUT MANY OF THE LEADERS OF THE GROUP ARE STILL AROUND SO WE ARE LEFT TO WONDER HOW MUCH HAS CHANGED.”

“In Macau I was put under various people’s “care”. They locked me in a room for about six months. During this time I felt very hopeless and oppressed by bad spirits,” Merry wrote. She said after a short time in Macau, the leadership began sending other teens to the camp. “Many of the same tactics began to be used on them as they used on me: fear, restrictions (absolute silence), severe paddling and solitary confinement for “serious cases”,” she wrote. “They added hard labour to the list. There were also long, exhausting exorcisms over many of these kids.

The leadership decided that this was all very effective and set up similar homes in other countries called Victor Homes.” Senior COG member Kathy Farrell and her former husband Michael Gambrell were both involved in running the Teen Detention Centre and Victor Program in Macau. A number of young people have alleged that the couple physically, sexually and emotionally abused them. Two young boys who spent time in Macau later committed suicide by jumping off buildings in Asia, one in Hong Kong.

Internal COG documents published on the exfamily.org website detail Farrell’s description of Merry’s treatment in Macau. “Her liberty is very restricted...she is forbidden to be with children...if she ever talks with someone, whether an adult or a child, it is only for brief moments...She is not completely lucid and often disoriented...how different from the bright intelligent girl she once was,” it reads. “She is not very alert, she is very slow and her head is not working right...she pulls out her hair to the point that she already has a small bald spot on her head. She scratches her lip in a strange way, like a nervous tic, and sometimes she scratches herself uncontrollably like monkeys do...Mene (Merry) has suffered irreparable harm and it’s possible she will never be a normal person again...in the System [outside world] they could consider her demented and soon they would lock her up in a mental hospital.”

After three years under house arrest in Macau, Merry was admitted to a psychiatric hospital after suffering a break down. She was later flown back to the US and



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John, who knew Merry in Macau, says she “suffered very badly”. He says Berg wanted her punished and used as an example to the others. “She was a nice girl, like all of the kids there, but she was strong willed and they did everything they could to break her,” he says. “In the end it was too much for her and I do not know where she is now, but I hope she is doing better.”

Former second generation member Sean Swede who spent time in the Victor Program in Matsumoto, Japan, in 1991, described the program as a “concentration camp”. “I must express that perhaps The Family’s worst abomination was the horrific detention centre in Macau (aka Ho’s ranch). All the DTs (detention teens) who later moved over all the way to Japan to the Victor Program, told me their nightmare stories,” Swede

wrote on exfamily.org. “I never knew there could ever be such a place in The Family such as the one in Macau. I am filled with deep sorrow when thinking back at what they experienced.”

Leaders of the group have publicly admitted to problems associated with child abuse, but claim it was rogue members and not sanctioned by the leadership of COG. In a letter posted on The Family-run website myconclusion.com, the former Macau detention centre director Kathy Farrell defends the group’s dealings with children. “Yup, granted we’ve made our share of mistakes, we’re not trying to appear to be lily white or perfect by no means,” she wrote. “Yet an organization like ours who caters to the lowly, heartbroken and confused world would by default pick up some who would make mistakes, don’t you think? And who doesn’t make mistakes?”

In an interview with Closer publisher Ricardo Pinto in 2003, Professor Kent says that the adult leaders in Macau were “vicious and cruel”. “Indeed, I would venture to say that,

in the context of a group that conducted violence against its young members, Macau was among the most abusive and demeaning in the world,” he says. “These victims suffered severe human rights abuses, which included sexual violations, and they deserve compensation.”

Professor Kent says the treatment far exceeded the most restrictive social scientific requirements of brainwashing. He says ex-member sources indicate that teen sex flourished at the Macau camp. “Moreover, adult sexual exploitation of young girls almost certainly continued at Macau’s Detention Teen program,” he said. Evidence from another member about the Macau Victor Program indicated that adult leaders were “encouraging all the teens to have as many dates as they could with other teens...these dates involved any two people who wanted to get together and have sex in a room which adults made available for this purpose”. The policy later changed prohibiting teens from having sex until the males were 16 and the

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females 15 and three months, so they would be 16 if they got pregnant.

Today The Family portrays itself as a Christian missionary movement dedicated to spreading God’s word through preaching and good works. Professor Kent says it will never be a respectable organization until it deals openly, honestly, and appropriately with the human rights abuses suffered by many children of first generation members.

“Moreover, the leaders must come out of hiding and be willing to be accountable for their actions. They cannot avoid responsibility by attempting to shift it onto the shoulders of the deceased founder, since his partner, Maria [Karen Zerby who now runs the group], was with him while he was alive and knew what was going on,” he said. “Besides, the leaders now claim that Berg speaks to them from heaven. In essence, the group seems unable to distance itself from its very troubled and abusive creator.”

John says he is troubled that many of

the abusive adults from the 1980s and 1990s are still active members of The Family. “They have never been dealt with, never been held accountable and they want the world to believe that things have changed,” he says. “Nothing will change until they admit what they did and the impact it had.”

Professor Kent says while the victims have an exceedingly strong case for seeking compensation for a wide array of abuses, practical issues impede them from doing so. “Jurisdictional issues are crucial, since abuses happened around the world, often in countries whose court systems are weak,” he says. “Likewise, practical issues involving compensation exist, since the group’s secrecy makes it difficult to determine its assets. Despite these issues, hundreds of children of the first generation realize that their parents’ generation failed them, to the point that many of them suffered severe human rights abuses.”

**John is not his real name*