

Mystery Shrouds Grand Rapids-Born Cult

Stories by Mary Kramer
and Joan Verdon

Twelve years ago, before Grand Rapids residents had ever heard of "Moonies" or the Rev. Jim Jones, a small religious cult was taking root right in their own backyards.

Today, a handful of grieving parents across the country point to Grand Rapids as the birthplace of a secret society — known here as "The Group" — which they claim brainwashed their sons and daughters into leaving home to follow a man they called "Sir."

"Sir" is a former Grand Rapids minister named Donald R. DeGraaf. He led more than 30 teens and young adults away from Grand Rapids in the early 1970s. Since that exodus began, DeGraaf has become an invisible man whose whereabouts remain a secret known only to a few trusted "disciples."

More visible are the scars he left on the minds of former disciples who have dropped out of the movement, young adults who blame their emotional problems, broken marriages and bouts with guilt and depression on their one-time messiah.

One Grand Rapids youth committed suicide while a member of DeGraaf's organization. Another youth slashed his wrists soon after leaving the movement, but survived.

Yet, through it all, DeGraaf, 39, has never been arrested by any of the many law enforcement agencies that have investigated him. He has prospered, supported by the loyal disciples who have devoted their lives and their earnings to him in return for a promise of eternal salvation.

Today, seven Grand Rapids wom-

THE GROUP: Salvation or Slavery?

Editor's Note: More than 30 Grand Rapids teens left their families eight years ago to follow a local minister who told them they had been chosen to do "God's work." But the parents of these young men and women say their children have been brainwashed by a con man who used religion to get rich. This special Press series is the story of those families, a mysterious cult and an unusual minister.

en are among those who still follow the man who made that remarkable promise.

Their parents, many of whom have not seen their daughters in five years or longer, still wonder how DeGraaf was able to capture their children's minds and grow rich, all in God's name.

While much of DeGraaf's activity over the last decade remains a mystery, interviews with dozens of former members, their parents and friends made one thing clear — what happened to these young people could have happened to any teenager. These stories could be told by any family.

The young people who left their families to follow DeGraaf were popular, intelligent teens from middle to upper-middle class families. Although The Group was born in the turbulent late 1960s, these teens were not, for the most part, alienated, or politically radical. In the age of the "generation gap," they had

fairly good relationships with their parents.

The seven women, now ranging in age from 27 to 30, seemed unlikely candidates to renounce their pasts and follow a man who claimed to be a messenger from God.

Pretty and popular, they were the cheerleaders and student leaders of their high school graduating classes.

They are:
Sandy Johnson — Her high school yearbook shows this 1969 graduate of East Grand Rapids High School as a pretty, friendly girl active in the Future Teachers Club, the Pep Club and the French Club.

Linda Knight — An attractive cheerleader with long dark hair, she graduated from Ottawa High School in 1970.

Judy Mulder — A 1968 graduate of East Christian High, she was a student at Calvin College when she joined The Group. Teachers and

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These 7 Are Still in the Group

30 Teens
Left Town
8 Years Ago;
Parents Say
They Were
Brainwashed



Judy Mulder
East Christian High 1968



Linda Joy Knight
Ottawa Hills High 1970



Sandy Johnson
East Grand Rapids 1969



Kathy Radimsk
Byron Center High 1968



Barbara Porter
East Grand Rapids 1970



Edee Pawlik
Catholic Central 1971



Peggy Taylor
Camstock Park 1968

The Group

from 1A

friends remember her as an extremely intelligent girl, "too smart" to get mixed up in anything like a cult.

Edee Pawlik — A 1971 graduate of Catholic Central High, Edee was a cheerleader, student council leader, and a National Honor Society officer. She was the girl who always participated in annual Thanksgiving food drives and other "do-good" projects.

Barb Porter — An outgoing, bubbly cheerleader who graduated from East Grand Rapids High School in 1970, she threw herself "200 percent" into every club she joined.

Kathy Radimak — A 1968 graduate of Byron Center High School, her yearbook describes her: "Like granulated sugar, refined and sweet." She worked as an usher and legal secretary and is remembered by a former employer as "a really sharp gal."

Peggy Taylor — A 1968 graduate of Comstock Park High School, she was a quiet, pretty teenager, a serious student who planned on attending a business college. "She appears quiet, but when you get to know her, that's when the fun begins," her yearbook says.

Barb Porter and Edee Pawlik apparently live at the ski lodge the group owns in Eagle Nest, New Mexico. The exact whereabouts of the other five Grand Rapids women are unknown.

The families of these women rarely hear from their daughters. They are grateful if they receive a single letter or phone call in a year's time. Some parents say they do not even know for sure if their daughters are still alive.

The mysterious movement all seven have devoted their lives to began in 1968. DeGraaf gathered together a handful of teens who hung out at night in downtown parking lots and established "The Group," described as a "Christ-centered youth group, no adults please."

The message DeGraaf preached was a simple one: Turn off drugs and turn on to the Bible.

Those early gatherings had music, goodwill and lots of friendly people who rallied behind what became The Group's trademark ex-

pression of the company's code of ethics.

Today, parents from as far away as Boston in the East and Albuquerque in the Southwest say they wish The Group had been stopped before it ever left Grand Rapids and ensnared their children.

In the eight years since DeGraaf first led his young followers out of Grand Rapids, The Group has:

- Been investigated by more than a dozen law enforcement agencies and had members arrested in several states on minor charges of fraudulently soliciting charitable donations.

- Been the target of a \$400,000 lawsuit by a former member who claimed DeGraaf and his Grand Rapids disciples caused her immeasurable mental anguish, brain damage and physical suffering.

- Had members kidnapped and deprogrammed by parents who believed such drastic measures were the only way to save their children from Grand Rapids' home-grown cult.

Through the years, The Group's story has never been fully told, not even in Grand Rapids where the organization was born.

One reason may be that former members often are reluctant to talk about their years in The Group — simply because the story sounds almost too incredible to be true.

While many of the former members interviewed by The Press were willing to have their names used, several asked to remain anonymous. Some fear reprisals from DeGraaf if he learned they spoke out against him. Others simply did not want to be ridiculed for their past involvement in the unorthodox organization.

"How would you tell someone?," asks one former member, now a secretary in a downtown office. "It was too bizarre. I wouldn't know where to start."

The best place would be with the story of Donald R. DeGraaf, a 1959 graduate of Creston High School and a one-time electronics salesman who turned prophet.

DeGraaf started The Group while he was a part-time minister of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. He was an active member of the church's congregation at 2140 Union Ave. SE. Later, he moved to the Northview branch at 4875 Palenque Pl. NE.

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Those early gatherings had music, goodwill and lots of friendly people who rallied behind what became The Group's trademark expression: "I feel fantastic!"

Before long, as many as 400 teens attended The Group's weekly meetings and sold everything from pocket combs to windshield scrapers to raise money for the organization.

But as The Group grew and prospered, DeGraaf apparently became intoxicated by the power he held over his zealous youthful followers eager to do his bidding.

He became obsessed with raising money — tax-free cash that went to support a rapidly escalating lifestyle centering on private airplanes, foreign automobiles, jewelry and expensive clothes.

DeGraaf's movement began to resemble many of the larger, better known religious cults, such as the Hare Krishnas and the "Moonies." But it had one characteristic that gave it a distinctly Grand Rapids flavor.

While devotees of those larger cults were selling incense and flowers on street corners, DeGraaf's disciples sold Amway products.

To broaden his financial base, he began sending disciples out-of-state to set up satellite Amway distributorships in cities across the country. Eventually, more than 30 Grand Rapids teenagers and young adults left home in the early 1970s to follow DeGraaf.

In each state the movement traveled through, new recruits joined the young people from Grand Rapids who claimed to be The New Elect on a mission from God.

Six years of intense Amway selling, first in Grand Rapids and then in at least nine states, enabled The Group to amass a fortune of thousands of dollars. In at least one state, Arkansas, they were investigated by the attorney general's office for using hard-sell and fraudulent sales techniques.

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At first, DeGraaf told his young followers that the purpose of The Group was simply to help others by "witnessing" to them about the value of accepting God into their lives.

Rallying to The Group's slogan of "I feel fantastic!" members recruited other teenagers from their own high schools, colleges and at shopping malls.

Later, DeGraaf revealed to his closest disciples that God had told him "in an out-loud voice" to form a group that would prepare for "the last days."

The charismatic young minister, then in his late 20s, picked his most trusted members to form an inner circle he called "The Elect" or "The Chosen of God."

In the beginning, The Group was enthusiastically supported by parents, who were happy to see their children turning on to religion instead of drugs or radical politics. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints welcomed the influx of new members to its two congregations here. The Amway Corporation seemed happy to sign up young salespeople who peddled soap with religious zeal.

But gradually that support evaporated. A group of Grand Rapids parents, alarmed at disturbing changes they saw in their children's personalities, threatened DeGraaf with legal action.

In 1971, the Northview church took away his priesthood powers, officially "silencing" him, as that church terms such a move.

The church elders accused DeGraaf of using hypnosis on his followers and "preaching to them to 'give up coffee, Cokes, school, employment, sex, home, drugs, TV, candy, negative thoughts, all for the celestial law that awaits them.'"

The church also criticized The Group's practice of holding "com-

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