

THE GROUP:

Salvation or Slavery?

Parents of Cultists Sadly Realize The Phone Call Won't Be Coming

Editor's Note: Several families in Grand Rapids have lost sons or daughters to a cult headed by former resident Donald DeGraaf. This is the fourth in a series about them.

Stories by Mary Kramer and Joan Verdon

Six mothers in Grand Rapids, and a dozen others scattered across the country, share the same dream: One day the phone will ring and the voice on the other end will say, "Mom, I want to come home."

They keep hoping for that phone call, although most know it will never happen. So they try to live with the thought that they may never again see the sons and daughters who left home years ago to follow a self-proclaimed prophet from Grand Rapids named Donald DeGraaf.

"If my daughter called and said, 'Mom, I want to come home,' I'd send her the money for the first

plane home. But I really don't expect that call," says one Grand Rapids mother who has not seen her daughter in eight years.

One of the first things Donald DeGraaf told the teen-aged followers he recruited here was "Don't tell your parents what you are doing. They won't understand and they'll stand in our way."

Recalls former member Paul Magnan of Grand Rapids: "We were taught to believe that because we were the Elect of God they really weren't our parents. They were just people that physically had you."

Still, some disciples who followed DeGraaf out of Grand Rapids often missed their families. A letter or phone call from home upset them, say young people who have since left the group.

But to prove they were good disciples, they tried to harden their



Kathy Radimak used to send birthday and Christmas cards home; now she doesn't.

See Parents, Page 2A

Stage Set for Test of County-wide Te

By Bill Dalton

18 of the county's 21 school districts. Union leaders said, however, it's

2
C

By M
Ke
crea
Tues
dish
their
Th
thre
duct
of M
othe
On
whet
clais
city
build
rolls
deve
Tu
city
may
lic of
misti
Th
ers
Warc
that
again
by de
Co
night
Yerr
Th
the
Un
mitte
with

probl
offic

Parents

from 1A

hearts toward home.

The parents left behind have been unable to cut those emotional ties so easily. "Not a day goes by when I don't think about her," says Edna Buckley of Boston, whose daughter Ginny joined the group in 1972.

When Bernice Taylor of Belmont talks about her daughter, Peggy, her eyes become moist and her voice chokes with emotion. "I don't know why she got mixed up in this," she says. "Most of these girls had everything... they didn't have to work."

Other parents say they have to force themselves not to think about their lost sons and daughters in order to keep their sanity.

Linda Knight's mother is one parent who did not want to be interviewed by The Press because it would resurrect too many painful memories.

"I don't lose sleep any more. If I did, I'd end up in Pine Rest," she said when contacted by a reporter. "I'm not going to let that happen to me. I have three other children I'm very grateful for. I just thank the stars for them."

None of the parents interviewed are planning to "kidnap" their children from the group. They feel such a drastic measure would fail and could ruin any chance of ever seeing their child again.

Most said they could accept their child's involvement in the group if they could be sure he or she is healthy and safe and if they could see them occasionally. Marvin Mulder spoke for most parents when he said, "The main thing we want is communication... if she (Judy) would come home occasionally — even at our own expense — we would be satisfied."

Every parent who has — or had — a child involved in the group has a different story to tell, from Mary Vernon, who is praying that God will help her daughter leave, to Viola Corser, one mother who no longer waits for the phone call. Here are some of their stories.

"She always sounded like my Kathy."

When Kathy Radimak became deeply involved in The Group in the early 1970s, her mother never imagined her daughter was part of a cult.

"I don't think I even knew what a cult was then," she says. "I never heard of such a thing until quite some time later."

Mary Vernon is one of the parents who still has a hard time deciding whether the movement her daughter has been a member of for more than a decade really is a cult.

"Up until two years ago we always had close contact with her," Mrs. Vernon recalls. "She always sent birthday and Christmas cards, a birthday or Christmas wouldn't go by without us getting a card or a call from Kathy."

And whenever Kathy called, "She always sounded like my Kathy," her

mother says. A little tired, perhaps, but not brainwashed.

Then two years ago Mary Vernon made what she calls "the biggest mistake of my life." Kathy had stopped her habit of corresponding frequently and her family didn't hear from her for six months.

"So I wrote her a letter and I said that if I didn't hear from her in two weeks I would go to the police station and put somebody out on a trail to find out if she was dead or alive. I threatened her and it was the biggest mistake of my life," she says.

Kathy called almost immediately after receiving the letter. "It was the only time she has ever sounded programmed to me," her mother says. "She sounded as if she was in a complete fog." Kathy said things like "it's better for you that I leave you alone," and the call ended with Mrs. Vernon saying "Kathy, may God bless you" and hanging up.

Then, several months later, after Mrs. Vernon had left a message for

Kat
nor
frot
Kat
has
F
som
gre
has
whi
loni
hap
hap
she'
Mrs
K
ber
has
hou
who
aski
shot
K
mot
hor
and
was
who

Final Cloth



Kathy at the group's ski lodge in northern New Mexico, she got a call from her daughter. "It was my Kathy all over again." But she hasn't heard from her since.

From the time Kathy left town some eight years ago to work for the group in Ohio, her mother says she has never really understood exactly what kind of a movement she belonged to. Kathy always said she was happy in her letters and sounded happy on the phone "and I thought, if she's happy that's all that matters," Mrs. Vernon recalls.

Kathy also sent home pictures of herself periodically and her mother has them hanging throughout her house. "Does that look like someone who is brainwashed?" her mother asks, pointing to one of the snapshots.

Kathy is now 30 years old. Her mother wishes she could come home for a visit to see her family and meet her niece Heather, who was born after Kathy left town and who bears an uncanny resemblance

to her Aunt Kathy.

Mrs. Vernon doesn't know exactly what her daughter is involved in and she's not sure even Kathy knows. But she says she knows one thing — "I have a lot of faith in God. God can do a lot of things and somewhere along the line she is going to straighten herself out. I just know it."

"At least now I know where he is."

"I know this sounds terrible," says Viola Corser, "but at least now I know where he is."

She is one of the parents who are no longer waiting for that phone call.

Unlike other parents who are still tracking disciples of DeGraaf, Mrs. Corser knows how her son Bob's involvement in the group ended. He was killed in an automobile crash last March 17 while leaving the group's New Mexico ski lodge.

When Bob's body was returned to his hometown of Toledo, Ohio, in

March, it was the first time Mrs. Corser had seen her son in eight years.

She says she began bracing herself for her son's death long before she received the confirming phone call from New Mexico. "I guess I expected him to come home that way," she says. "Ever since the Guyana incident I expected to see him on TV some day."

Bob, who was 30 years old when he died, joined the group in 1971 in Toledo, the group's first stop on its exodus from Grand Rapids.

A younger sister and Bob's girlfriend began attending the group's meetings and they persuaded Bob, who had recently graduated from college and was starting a promising career as an architect, to accompany them.

Bob kept going to the meetings even after his sister and girlfriend had dropped out. "He just got into it

See Parents, Page 4A

Quality
and Fashion
For

Parents

from 2A

deeper and deeper," she recalls.

"He started getting active in it in September and by Christmas he was a different person. He used to be a happy-go-lucky person but all of a sudden he was very serious and he didn't smile any more.

In 1972 Bob moved to Florida to help start a new branch of the group and an Amway sales organization in Orlando. Mrs. Corser didn't know where he was or how to get in touch with him.

As Bob moved from state to state with the group over the next eight years, his parents never knew where he was living. Sometimes they'd hear from him, more often they didn't.

Then in March, they got a call from one of the members of the group, Barb Porter, informing them that Bob and another disciple had been killed when the van he was driving collided head-on with a gasoline tanker on a snowy morning.

After checking with New Mexico police to make sure it really was her son in the van ("At first I said how do I know it's Bob. I haven't seen him in eight years"), Mrs. Corser called the ski lodge to arrange for Bob's belongings to be sent home.

She says she was shocked by Porter's callous attitude. "She said Bob didn't have any clothing of his own, that he shared his clothes with another boy and now that he was gone they would be used by someone else. I asked her about all the books Bob took with him and his high school ring and she just said, real cold, 'I have to go now. I have 40 kids I have to make dinner for.'"

"It's not over — I'll never forget it"

Kay Aldridge is one of the lucky parents. Her son and daughter, among the first teenagers to join

The Group when it started in Grand Rapids, have left the movement.

But Mrs. Aldridge says she still bears the scars of several years of worrying inflicted on her by DeGraaf.

"It's not over, I'll never forget it," says Mrs. Aldridge, a feisty woman who minces no words when she gets on the subject of DeGraaf.

In the beginning, the Aldridges were enthusiastic supporters of the "Christ-centered youth group" their son and daughter joined when they were 16 and 15. Son Chuck had been "on pot" before he joined the group. When he told them one day "You don't have to worry about me any more," they welcomed the youth group that had turned him off drugs.

"When your kids get on drugs you'll do anything to get them off," Kay Aldridge says.

Eventually they began to discover that DeGraaf was telling teenagers to move out of their homes. They started to hear about the military training that took place on the group's weekend trips and the charges that DeGraaf was brainwashing youngsters.

The Aldridges began meeting with other Grand Rapids parents to see if there was a way to break the hold DeGraaf had on their children. The parents contacted an attorney to see if they could take any legal action against DeGraaf.

The Aldridges' son Chuck was in the group for five years and followed DeGraaf to Florida to start a branch of the movement there. Chuck's younger sister probably would have moved out of town with the group also, but the Aldridges got word to DeGraaf that "if he ever takes our daughter out of town, there'll be hell to pay."

Although her children have been out of the group for some seven years, Kay Aldridge hasn't forgiven DeGraaf for the emotional anguish he caused her.

"He's got it too good," she says

bitterly. "He's got all the money in the world, all the girls in the world and they're all sticking with him. He could charm a snake, I guess."

Like most parents, she feels mainline churches have to help stop the cults. "Get the churches to open their books; that's the only way to get these people," she says. "They can do anything in the name of a non-profit, tax-free church. If the big churches would go along with the idea of opening up their books these groups wouldn't be able to hide their money."

"I can't let it bother me"

"You don't know what it's like after 11 years," says the attractive East Grand Rapids woman, the mother of one of DeGraaf's disciples, who did not want her name used.

"It's no longer a priority. I've got too many things going on in my life for my daughter to be a priority issue. She was for a long time, but I have to look at it objectively.

"I've gone through all the stages — the crying stage, resentment, anger, bitterness — but now I'm at a point where I've put it all behind me. I've had to."

Her daughter was one of the first teenagers to join the group in 1968. She says it took her many years before she was able to "put it all behind me" and escape the torture of constant worry over the daughter she hasn't seen in five years.

She has told her daughter: "This door is always going to be open for you," but she says she knows her daughter will have to come home on her own.

If that happens, this mother, like the others, will be overjoyed. But until then, "I can't let it bother me," she says. "I had her, I raised her, and I know she's somewhere in the world, but I don't know where. It's weird, but I don't let that bother me as much."

Next: Will the missing women ever come home?