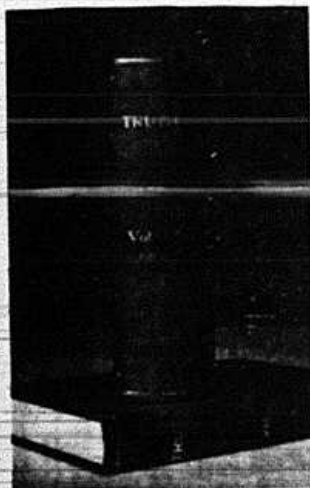


A Prankster Turns Into a 'Messiah'



'Truth I' and 'Truth II,' two hard-cover books The Group had printed, describe DeGraaf's transformation.

Editor's Note More than 30 Grand Rapids teenagers left their families eight years ago to follow a local man and do "God's work." Their parents say he is a con man who brainwashed them. This is the second part of a series.

**Stories By Mary Kramer
And Joan Verdon**

Don DeGraaf's classmates at Creston High School probably would have voted him "least likely to start a religious movement."

Friends of the slight, dark-haired member of the Class of 1959 remember him as a "hell-raiser" and a "fun-loving guy" with a weakness for pranks.

Somewhere between 1959 and 1968, when he founded his religious group, the Creston High "hell-raiser" turned into a self-proclaimed messiah with the power to persuade young people to leave their families and follow him across the country.

At least one high school buddy thinks that underneath DeGraaf's new identity as a spiritual leader

THE GROUP: Salvation or Slavery?

lurks the old "hell-raiser," playing one of the most profitable practical jokes of his life.

"I can almost see Don laughing to himself every time he gets a person to believe that stuff," says the friend, now a police officer in an area law enforcement agency.

Don DeGraaf — con man or prophet? Who is the man who persuaded seven women from Grand Rapids — and a handful of young people from across the country — to leave their homes and devote their lives to him?

Born January 9, 1941, DeGraaf grew up on Aberdeen Street on the city's Northeast Side. After he graduated from Creston High

School and spent time in the Navy, DeGraaf moved through a number of jobs — salesman at Montgomery Wards, salesman for Town and Shore Realty and electronics salesman — before he turned to religion.

His high school yearbook picture shows an intense, good-looking teenager, with short dark hair and dark, penetrating eyes.

Today, he is a 39-year-old man of medium build with dark hair and a slightly receding hairline, who usually sports a dark beard, according to persons who have seen him in recent years.

But that description is apt to change. DeGraaf has on occasions

died his hair to a reddish tint and once had it styled into an "Afro," former-disciples report.

High school friends remember DeGraaf as the guy who would try anything once, the type who was "everything but a Nazi" by the time he was 18.

The adopted son of Gerald and Alice DeGraaf, Don was often excused in his high school pranks by his indulging parents, who doted on their only son.

"They never looked at him as he was," recalls a former girlfriend who asked to remain anonymous because she feared for her safety. "They would always blame any trouble on the other person."

That attitude apparently continued as DeGraaf built his controversial movement. In the mid-1970s, when the chief of security at Amway Corp. attempted to contact the elder DeGraaf about his son's movements, Gerald DeGraaf refused to speak to him.

Contacted recently by The Press, Mrs. DeGraaf also refused to an-

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DeGraaf sported a beard in the 1970s and still wears one, according to reports.

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swer questions about her son.

"This is all Don's life and we aren't a part of that. We've never gotten into any of that. It's like a business and we don't discuss it. We're not in the Group," said Mrs. DeGraaf, who lives with her husband in Florida.

She said she understood that her son was difficult to find, but added, "Maybe he doesn't want to discuss anything; maybe it's his own private business."

After high school, DeGraaf enlisted in the Navy and served about 18 months before receiving a discharge. Friends say he later boasted about how he "put one over" on the Navy by purposely acting "crazy" to get the discharge.

The Navy stint followed what a girlfriend remembers as one of young DeGraaf's most traumatic experiences: the discovery he was

adopted.

He apparently learned the circumstances of his illegitimate birth when he was seeking a copy of his birth certificate to enlist in the Navy, she recalled.

"It was quite traumatic for him... he had a lot of trouble dealing with it. When he was 18 or 19, he had the chance to meet his real mother and he was asking everybody what he should do. I don't really know if he ever did meet her."

One ex-member of DeGraaf's group, David Bixby, a former Grand Rapids musician who now lives in Seattle, speculates that the experience is the reason behind DeGraaf's insistence that disciples cut all ties with their parents. "Look at it this way; he couldn't have his parents so nobody else could," Bixby says.

DeGraaf describes his transformation from "hell-raiser" to holy man in "Truth I" and "Truth II," two hardcover books that members of the group had printed approxi-

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**FILL YOUR
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mately five years ago. The books contain transcripts of DeGraaf's tape-recorded messages to his disciples.

While he was in high school and the Navy, "it wasn't cool to believe in God, so I didn't," DeGraaf told his followers. "I was brought up in a Christian family and that sort of drove me away."

In "Truth 1," he relates that while he was in the Navy he went to a party and became involved in an argument about religion. "I told them that I didn't believe there was a God," DeGraaf said. "I felt there were a lot more valuable things to do than go to church and waste your time on Sunday. You could be doing something more constructive, like drinking."

A young woman at the party then approached him, crying because he didn't "know God." "She got down on her knees in front of me and prayed out loud for me," DeGraaf said.

DeGraaf told his followers he was so moved by the experience that he was physically unable to speak for several hours. "In that moment of time and space I understood that there was a thing called God... that was a revelation. God did touch me." That was the first of the many divine revelations DeGraaf claimed to have received.

DeGraaf never earned a college degree but what he lacked in formal academic training, he compensated for in his eager pursuit of a number of self-help philosophies.

Through high school, a brief stint in the Navy and during the early stages of The Group, DeGraaf studied a number of self-awareness and human potential philosophies, ranging from a conservative Dale Carnegie salesmanship course to Silva Mind Control to enrolling in a version of Werner Erhard's est training.

When DeGraaf started his youth group, he used all the powers of persuasion that made him a good salesman to sell teenagers on a life of meditation, discipline and service to The Group. He also seemed to have a solid understanding of adolescent psychology.

He made the young members compete for his approval by allowing only the best disciples into his inner circle — an "in-group" more selective than the toughest sorority. And he played on every 18-year-old's belief that they are special and destined for great things by telling his followers they had been personally chosen by God to do his work.

Most of the people who knew DeGraaf when he founded The Group — even those who now despise him as a false prophet — are convinced he honestly wanted to help troubled teens... at least in the beginning.



DeGraaf, center, is pictured with Kevin MacInness, left, and Dave Bixby, two former members of The Group, at one of their meetings at Townsend Park.

Nam War years. Among the first teens The Group attracted was a small band of students from East Grand Rapids High School.

Before DeGraaf became caught up in his "ministry," his father had hoped Don would eventually take over the family business, Ada Manufacturing Co., located directly across East Fulton Street from Amway's headquarters. DeGraaf worked for his father for a few years, but soon devoted all his time to The Group, particularly after his followers became Amway distributors in 1971.

That same year, however, things had begun to fall apart for The Group in Grand Rapids. Reports of nude meditation sessions, survival maneuvers and other unorthodox activities were filtering back to parents.

In March, 1971, officials at the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints "silenced" DeGraaf because of the The Group's activities, an act that stripped him of his priestly powers.

After two Group members were arrested for attempting to tap the phones of the minister of DeGraaf's church, the leader's sense of paranoia became obvious. "After the wiretapping, he started carrying a gun," says former member Paul Magnan, a musician who lives in Grand Rapids.

DeGraaf also began uttering what was to become a familiar phrase: "A prophet is never recognized in his own home."

He rapidly began expanding his operations to other cities. In 1972, he left Grand Rapids and was sending more than 30 followers to other states to start satellite operations. About 25 members of The Elect were left behind.

The exodus has taken the movement through at least nine states and many cities, with DeGraaf's ex-

changed his mind.

"After The Training, Don told everyone he was just a man and all the rules were off. But then the money wasn't coming in any more and he slapped the rules back on," remembers former member David Bixby.

Savage contends DeGraaf is "one of those types who searched into everything," a man who sincerely, but misguidedly believed that God spoke to him directly.

"DeGraaf made one of those fatal mistakes that leaders often make," Savage notes. "They get themselves between individuals and God. As a result, they destroy any good they may be doing. They set themselves between God and the individual's experience of God in their lives."

The Rev. Kent Burtner, a Catholic priest in Santa Fe, N.M. and a nationally recognized authority on religious cults, believes DeGraaf is an unstable sociopath, an anti-social rebel and a man obsessed by the need to manipulate others.

Burtner helped "deprogram" a former member of DeGraaf's movement, and feels the experience gave him some insight into the enigmatic leader: "I get the picture of a person with a powerful need to control. Once it gets going, he can't stop. But he's unstable. His own goals and values keep fluctuating, so it's been difficult to build a very large membership."

Donald DeGraaf, conman, prophet or disciple of the devil — perhaps the only one who can answer that question is Donald DeGraaf. Afd he's keeping everyone guessing.

Next: How DeGraaf built a financial fortune and eluded investigation.

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ally chosen by God to do his work. Most of the people who knew DeGraaf when he founded The Group — even those who now despise him as a false prophet — are convinced he honestly wanted to help troubled teens... at least in the beginning.

Only after The Group began making thousands of tax-free dollars did the character of The Group — and DeGraaf — begin to change.

"He was a very idealistic man," recalls Shelton "Mickey" Gulley, a 43-year-old bank executive who co-founded The Group.

Gulley, who now lives near Dallas, Tex., says DeGraaf "played it straight... he was a real Mr. Clean," until the adulation of dozens of impressionable teenage followers altered his character. "The power got to him," Gulley says simply. "Instead of the main point of The Group being God, Don DeGraaf took the place of God."

But Gulley still maintains that when The Group started, "it was a beautiful, beautiful thing. To see those kids get off the drugs and start wanting to do something meaningful with their lives was wonderful."

DeGraaf met Gulley about 1967. DeGraaf and his wife, the former Pat Ellis, whom he married in 1944 and divorced in 1972, lived across the street from Mickey and Trudy Gulley in the Westgate subdivision in Comstock Park.

DeGraaf had been introduced to the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormon) through a Navy buddy. He was intrigued by the church and when he returned to Grand Rapids, he began attending services at the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The Reorganized Church split with the Mormon Church in 1852; among its doctrines is one that really intrigued DeGraaf — the strong belief that God still speaks directly to man today.

Gulley began attending church with DeGraaf; soon, the two men joined a downtown urban ministry program sponsored by the local council of churches. Together they would "patrol" the bars and parking lots near Veterans' Park where dozens of teens congregated at night.

The Group they founded in 1968 was typical of youth groups begun by established churches eager to attract young members in the anti-establishment atmosphere of the Viet

nam war. DeGraaf's followers in other states to start satellite operations. About 25 members of The Elect were left behind.

The exodus has taken the movement through at least nine states and many cities, with DeGraaf's exact home address always a secret to everyone but a couple of close disciples.

Tracking DeGraaf has been difficult, even for police agencies. He makes it a practice never to put his signature on any document relating to the movement. Transactions are conducted in cash. He rarely visits the one site where most of his followers currently reside, a ski lodge in northeastern New Mexico.

Parents and even a private detective hired by a former member have been unable to track DeGraaf down.

The Press tried repeatedly to make contact with DeGraaf. His disciples were asked to relay messages to him that The Press was writing about the group but he never responded. The Press also sent reporters to New Mexico and Nevada during its search, but the trips produced no address for the elusive leader.

From time to time clues turn up — a traffic ticket is issued to DeGraaf in Las Vegas, his plane is spotted in Colorado — but none of them has led to his doorstep.

At one point in the group's journey across the country it appeared DeGraaf was tired of playing "God" to his overly dependent flock.

In the mid-1970s, he directed his disciples to enroll in a seminar similar to Erhard Seminars Training (est). Called The Training, the seminars were the brainchild of entrepreneur Rik Savage of Albuquerque, N.M.

The Training taught individuals to take responsibility for everything that happens to them in their lives. Savage theorizes that DeGraaf actually was trying to relax his hold on his disciples because he had tired of being responsible for so many people.

"I would imagine he had his hands full," says Savage. "Most of those people (DeGraaf's disciples) struck me as very naive."

But apparently after trying to release his followers, DeGraaf, as he has done so many times before,

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Commissioners met every day last week in closed sessions to heal internal rifts and hammer out the proposal.

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