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'Lee' recounts sect horrors

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As the woman they called "Lee" spoke from the church pulpit, the crowd, estimated at 1,000, was deathly quiet, hanging on every word. For most, it was the first time they had heard about the alleged goings-on within the Church of Scientology.

They listened, somewhat in awe, as the 34-year-old Wisconsin woman recounted methodically her 12 years in the church. Then, as she spoke more passionately about the past two years, they heard of her emotional and physical struggle to break away from the sect.

Lee was introduced by local religious leaders, who, apparently, had informed the crowd of the Thursday night meeting at the Trinity Presbyterian Church, 2001 Rainbow Drive, Clearwater.

Still, the meeting was shrouded in secrecy. The press was told it would not be allowed to attend. Afterward, Dr. J. Jey Deifell, pastor of the church, refused to say who was responsible for organizing the meeting or if the local clergy was handing together.

"We have chosen not to make it public in the ways some others have," he said.

"With all due respect to your profession," he said, "people sometimes tend to read things into it that aren't there."

Lee offered no proof of her involvement with the church, but relayed a detailed story, sometimes quoting from what she contended were church documents, about the travesty she said began in the late 1960s when she was 18.

"I speak not as an expert," she said, "but as a victim."

She spoke of an unhappy childhood and a broken home in Wisconsin she left when she was 13. She drifted around the United States, spending some time as a "hippie." Without a strong family or

religious background, she said she was "a prime person to become involved in a cult."

An accomplished pianist, Lee said she was introduced to Scientology by a California piano teacher. She was taken to a Scientology center.

"I was impressed," she said. "The people were very friendly and gave me a great deal of attention. They were very loving."

"It just seemed to be a happy experience, something I had looked for all of my life."

She said she was told it was a group "far advanced of any on the planet." She was told about people who travel outside their bodies to different planets, stories that "really fascinated me."

Her Scientology training began with auditing, a form of counseling, she said. She sat in a chair, touching knees with an auditor sitting directly across from her, and they stared eye-to-eye for two hours.

She wondered about the exercise, but quickly dismissed her doubts.

"I lost my own will within a very short time," she said. "I became used to doing what I was told."

She claimed the church works on a fear-hope mechanism, first instilling fear in recruits and then offering Scientology as the only cure, "man's one chance." She said she was told the church was the cure for insanity and crime, which it would wipe out when Scientology converts the world to its ways.

Sect members believes the only race is one between Scientology and nuclear weapons, she said.

"That's why Scientologists are so fanatical and dedicated," she said. "They very strongly believe Scientology is the

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only hope any of us have.

"I fell for it and became a very dedicated Scientologist."

The lesson was repeated and reinforced in each of the classes she attended during the next 12 years, traveling to different centers throughout the country, eventually coming to The Fort Harrison Hotel in Clearwater as she progressed in the church.

Peer pressure mounted, instilling a fear of "expulsion or ostracism" if one doubted the church or its members. "Doubt was never allowed," she said.

Non-Scientologists, intent on impeding the church, were called "Suppressive Persons," unenlightened and unfortunate. Outside institutions—police, physicians, psychiatrists and colleges—were considered "enemies," she claimed.

After 10 years in the church, Lee said she became eligible for advanced "OT level" courses.

Besides great status in the church, OTs or "Operating Thetans," held the powers of telepathy, travel outside their bodies and controlling other people.

"It was the dream of all my friends," she said.

It was September 1979 when she started the course, nervous and excited, cloaked in secrecy.

She carried a locked briefcase, chained to her arm, which contained the documents she would study.

"I walked into the classroom and opened the case," she said, and "took out the secret materials I had been waiting all these years to read. It was the most fantastic story I've ever heard."

She claimed to have read about an overpopulated galaxy a trillion years ago, ruled by a dictator called Xenu. In the story, penned by church founder L. Ron Hubbard, Xenu killed all the extra people and transported them via space ships to two islands on Earth, one being Hawaii, she said.

Once there, terrific explosions were set off and the electronic force packed the "clusters of demons into people."

As a studying thetan, Lee said she was to spend her time exorcising those demons from her body.

"That's all you do," she said. "I wondered, but I had no capacity to question. L. Ron Hubbard was God to me."

She said she practiced the exorcism in California for two months, sitting alone in a small room, her eyes closed as she tried to visualize, telepathically communicate with and destroy the demons.

She did it until she "collapsed. I couldn't go on."

She began feeling ill, paranoid and was haunted by nightmares. "My whole world collapsed," she said. "I was terrified of being alive; afraid the demons would get me."

Not knowing what to do with her, Lee said church leaders sent her to Clearwater and The Fort Harrison Hotel, which she called the "elite" center for advanced OT training.

She invested \$16,000 for another course, financed by an inheritance and by selling her piano, a diamond ring and a collection of gold coins.

entology outlay to more than \$50,000, she said, which she had financed previously through a job as a "top systems analyst for International Business Machines Corp."

After four months in Clearwater, still finding no success with exorcism, she said she was "physically and mentally in bad shape," but afraid to leave the church.

About the same time, in February 1980, she said a Swiss woman and Scientologist in Clearwater leaped to her death from a causeway bridge. The incident caused the church to guard Lee closely, keeping her from outside help to prevent "more newspaper stories on Scientology failures," she claimed.

Lee said she was told to pick a spot in the country where the church would send her, and she, under guard, was flown to her parents' Wisconsin home and "literally dumped on the doorstep."

Having "become 100 percent dependent on Scientology," she has battled for almost two years to readjust to life outside the church.

For 18 months she lived in constant fear. "I believed I would die," she said. She was unable to communicate, having spent 12 years with no one outside the church, was haunted by paranoia, and afraid to be alone or travel even short distances.

Her thoughts were of returning eventually to the church until she "began to emerge from the world of fear I lived in."

She called the transition "terribly overwhelming," saying she still has difficulty relaxing.

Through self-study, she began to de-program herself, reading "four or five books a day" about cults after quitting a waitress job she said she could not handle.

"Finally, something in my mind snapped and I saw I was programmed," she said.

That led her to call an attorney and, in November 1981, she returned to Clearwater to file suit against the church. The suit is pending.

"I was surprised to find out it has a beach," she said of her return to Clearwater. "I was never more than a few blocks from the hotel when I was here."

Hugh Wilhere, a spokesman for the Church of Scientology in Clearwater, declined to rebut Lee's story, but offered a statement.

"The description (of Lee) fits a woman who, because of her erratic behavior, was asked to leave the church premises and was escorted to the home of parents," Wilhere said. "She was not employed by the church and had come to our Clearwater retreat center at her own insistence."

He said all donations she made to the church were returned to her.

"Despite her assurances and written statements that Scientology had helped her," Wilhere said, "we had come to realize that the damage caused by the psychiatric treatment she received prior to joining the church was beyond repair."

"It appears to us she has joined up with Michael Flynn (a Boston attorney who represents several former Scientologists in suits against the church) and is using churches and the media in Clearwater to set the stage for filing a lawsuit in hopes of making a