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Scientology's Children



INTRODUCTION

Roy seemed adrift. He was 14 and headed for trouble. But when he entered a Scientology school, the transformation was swift. Within two years, he was working alongside the Church of Scientology's most senior executives.

The church reels off dozens of success stories like Roy's. But it doesn't mention a Clearwater boy named Carlo.

Carlo, 15, didn't go to school. He worked from 8:30 in the morning until 10 at night — for \$30 a week. He told police that he couldn't contact his own father because his father had an affair with a woman in the church. His mother lived in Clearwater, but not with Carlo.

These are glimpses of Scientology's children. The stories in this two-day series will give you more glimpses. What they will not give you is the definitive story of Scientology's children because for the most part they exist behind a shroud.

More than 200 children of Scientologists live in the Tampa Bay area. Clearwater is the church's international spiritual headquarters. It is home to 600 staff members who work with thousands of visiting Scientologists each year.

Scientology is a most visible presence: The staff's uniforms give downtown Clearwater the look of a naval base. But the daily lives of Scientologists — and their children — are kept far from view.

Richard Haworth, the church spokesman, says, "Scientology families are among the happiest there are." And 180 Scientologists wrote letters to the *Times* saying the church helped them or their children.

But the *Times*' requests to interview children or parents on Scientology's staff were declined for months. The *Times* turned to former Scientologists and other sources. They remember a lifestyle quite different from what Haworth describes. They say that for some children, home is a crowded apartment.

Family time means an hour a day with parents. Parents desert kids. Kids abandon parents.

Haworth blamed "a handful of disgruntled ex-members" for those accounts and accused the *Times* of "malice toward the church."

But whatever their motives, the critics' stories are consistent. And troubling.

Part One of Two



Photo by JEFFERY MA

Kristi, left, and Beth Erlich grew up in the Church of Scientology, but eventually left. In the top photo, taken by their mother when Kristi and Beth were children, the two girls perform TR-Zero, Scientology drill that calls for two people to stare at each other "without any compulsions to do anything," the church says. The routine is designed to improve communication skills.

'I still have nightmares'

By CURTIS KRUEGER
Times Staff Writer

When Beth Erlich was 11, she signed her first contract.

A billion-year contract.

Beth didn't understand it too well. But her father had explained: If she signed the contract, she would help save the world.

"I thought that, of course I want to save the world."

The young girl had just pledged her life to Scientology.

The contract is a standard document whose unusual nature is not questioned in a church that believes in reincarnation.

For the next several years, she grew up in Clearwater as a loyal Scientologist. In her early teens, she said, she worked until 10:30 almost every night, including school nights. She said she didn't complain when dinner was rice and beans, or when cockroaches scamped across her room.

Now, eight years have passed since Beth last saw Clearwater. She has left the church.

But the nightmares haven't stopped.

Even now, she sees Clearwater's Fort Harrison Ho-

tel in a recurring dream. Her former guardians appear. A sensation of pressure stifles her.

"I can't get out," Beth said recently. "I can't leave the Fort Harrison building. It's still making an impression."

"I'm still not over it," she said. "I'm still not. I still have nightmares."

Beth and her sister, Kristi, grew up in the Church of Scientology. It was a shattering experience that, in ways big and small, forced them apart from their parents and each other. Critics of Scientology say their story is not unique. In a church that demands total devotion, they say, family life and children often come in second. So the story of Beth and Kristi is the story of many of Scientology's children.

The church labels its critics disgruntled former members and "hate vendors." Actually, said church spokesman Richard Haworth, "Scientology helps parents and children to improve their relationships with each other."

Please see ERLICH 1

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Erich from 1A

The two sisters shared a bedroom at their home in Los Angeles and rode their bikes to school together.

They called each other "Gold" and "Silver" because they were alike, but slightly different.

Beth was brunet, Kristi blond. Beth was 9, Kristi 8. Even their Christmas gifts were alike, but slightly different. They usually got the same gift in different colors.

"People, when they talked about Beth, they talked about me, too, and vice versa," Kristi remembers. "We were kind of one person in a way: Beth-and-Kris."

But not for long.

■ ■ ■

Beth and Kristi's parents, both Scientologists, had divorced in the early 1970s. The girls lived in California with their mother, who snapped a photo of Beth and Kristi staring at each in a church training routine.

Their father, Dennis Erlich, had left to join the staff at the church's spiritual headquarters in Clearwater. He was the "chief cramming officer," a position he now describes as "the quality control engineer at the brainwashing plant."

At the time, the job seemed crucial. But Erlich missed his daughters. On visits to Los Angeles, he urged the girls to move to Clearwater with him. Eventually, Beth agreed.

Beth moved to Clearwater in 1978, and missed Kristi immediately. The two girls, 9 and 10, became instant pen pals.

Beth learned quickly that her life had changed dramatically.

She lived with her father and his new wife in a room "the size of a closet" at the Fort Harrison Hotel, the biggest Scientology-owned building in Clearwater.

That didn't last. Soon she moved in with about 20 women church workers in a different room in the hotel. The room was bigger, but stuffed with bunks and dressers.

Next she moved across town, to the "QI" — a former Quality Inn the Scientologists had bought on U.S. 19, near East Bay Drive. Dennis Erlich said it was not unusual for parents and children to live in different rooms at the QI. That's just the way it was, he said.

Sometimes Beth would return to discover she had been moved

night I would come home and my stuff would be someplace else." She guesses she eventually was moved as many as 20 times. Children, she said, were moved routinely to make room for adult Scientologists.

During the day, Beth attended a Scientology-affiliated school. She described it as a go-at-your-own-pace, choose-your-own-courses system.

One year, in eighth grade, she went to Oak Grove Middle School, a public school in Clearwater.

"We were such poor students," she said. "That's all I can remember, was how backward, how awful I felt."

Beth did love one thing about public school: the food.

"At the time, I was used to eating main dishes which were rice with something or beans with something."

Compared to the food served up at the QI for the Scientology staff, lunches and breakfasts at school were wonderful, she said.

"Oh wow, it was heaven," she said. "It was incredible. A square meal."

Why would someone allow their child to live as Beth did? Scientologists, particularly staff Scientologists, firmly believe they are saving the world, former members say. Next to that grand purpose everything else is secondary.

"Scientology comes first, and everything else is off-purpose," said Vicki Aznaran, a former high-ranking Scientology official who is suing the church. "Parents who want to spend time with their children are looked down on. It's not socially acceptable."

Haworth responded: "True, parents (on the church staff) do work longer hours because of their commitment to the goals of the church, but they also have fashioned a system that provides for families to live in a healthy environment despite the demands on time."

Dennis Erlich was happy to have Beth by his side. And proud.

He considered himself a superior parent. He had brought Beth to Clearwater, where she could accomplish something truly important. Here, she was helping church

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Erlich from 12A

staff members who gave people Scientology counseling and training.

The thought of preparing her for college and a career never crossed his mind.

"I didn't want my daughter to be part of just normal society," he said. "I wanted her to grow up to be, you know, like me. An auditor or a cramming officer, or something worthwhile."

Beth accepted the role. She took Scientology courses and after turning 11, signed the billion-year contract to join the "Sea Org." The Sea Organization is a group of highly committed staff members who do the church's business and spiritual work.

Members generally work 12-hour days, six or seven days a week and currently are paid about \$30 per week. The church gives them room and board.

Beth still went to school during the day. But at night, she worked as a file clerk and at other jobs, often alongside her father at the Fort Harrison. At her request, she sometimes studied Scientology during work hours.

The Scientology school never assigned homework, she said. "It was just understood that when we left school, we left it and went to work." She described a typical schedule:

Sunday: From 8 in the morning until 10:30 at night.

Monday through Friday: From after school until 10:30 p.m.

Saturday: Noon to 10:30 p.m. one week, off the next.

That works out to about 50 hours of work a week, during school. In the summer, Beth said she worked "full time." Other children worked similar hours, she said.

"I never got a chance to just sit around."

On her fortnightly days off, she liked to spend time with her dad. They would sleep late, eat at a favorite deli, go to the beach and see a movie.

Beth also got Scientology "auditing," in which she was hooked up to a device called an "E-meter," similar to a lie detector, and asked about things that troubled her.

The future looked clear.

"I grew up thinking that I was going to become something in the church," Beth said. "I wasn't going to college, I wasn't going to learn a trade."

Despite his pride, Dennis Erlich was a little worried. He knew the Church of Scientology's environment was a harsh one — people always screamed at each other, and important people got demoted and shamed at a moment's notice.

So he decided to toughen her up. Once, when she did something that irked him, he simply stopped talking to her for several weeks. He didn't say a word — not even on her birthday.

The ideal Scientology parent does not pamper a child. In fact, several former members said Scientologists believe children are "adults in small bodies" who shouldn't be ordered around.

"In order to be a good Scientologist," says former member Adeline Dodd-Bova, "you're allowing your child to be responsible for themselves. I don't have to tell my 5-year-old son if he's hungry or not, he knows. I don't have to make him dinner, he can go get food."

Scientology literature on children, like much of Hubbard's other writings, is subject to several interpretations.

The following passage, for instance, from Hubbard's "How to Live With Children," could have come from Dr. Spock: "A good, stable adult with love and tolerance in his heart is about the

Other passages sound more like what Dodd-Bova was talking about: "Any law which applies to the behavior of men and women applies to children." Or, "When you give a child something, it's his. . . . So he tears up a shirt, wrecks his bed, breaks his fire engine. It's none of your business."

As Beth worked in the cloistered world of Scientology, Kristi's letters from California provided a link to the outside. They told Beth which bands were hot, what slang was in vogue.

But Kristi's letters weren't enough. Beth suffered bouts of depression because she missed her sister and mother.

This created a conflict.

"I felt like I needed to be in the church because that was the right thing to do," she said. "But then the little girl inside of me was saying, 'I need to be with my mom.'"

She wished her mother would have told her to stay home in Los Angeles. That would have made it easier to leave.

But her mother never said a thing.

It wouldn't have been proper, family members said.

"That just wasn't part of Scientology," Kristi said.

"Part of my mom was saying 'Beth is a being unto herself and she must make her decisions and do her thing.' And the other half of her was saying 'wait-a-second, you're her mom, you love her, you want her to be with you. And in a way, I think that's all it would have taken to get Beth to stay . . . but that Scientology in my mom wouldn't allow her to express her feelings about that.'"

Beth didn't learn until years later how her mother really felt.

"She was crying really the entire time that (Beth) was gone," Kristi said.

Kristi said her mother did not want to comment for this article.

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Beth was allowed to visit her family in Los Angeles a couple of times a year.

Every time Beth returned, "it was like lovers reuniting," Kristi recalls. "I mean we practically, all of us kind of clung to each other the entire time she was there."

Then depression would sink in.

"After the first couple days, I would just be totally just scared about the fact that I had to leave," Beth said.

"I can remember them telling me, you know, 'You're here right now. You're not leaving. There's no reason to feel like you're losing us, because you're here, right here.'"

"And it didn't mean anything. I was a basket case."

■ ■ ■

Then one summer, things looked up.

When Beth was 13 and Kristi was 12, plans were made for Kristi to visit Clearwater.

Beth was ecstatic.

So was Kristi — until she saw the room she was going to share with Beth at the former Quality Inn.

"Oh my god, I couldn't even believe that Beth lived in a place like that," Kristi said. "There were bugs everywhere. . . . We were always scared of having bugs run across our feet and face and stuff while we were sleeping."

One night, while Beth was working, Kristi and some other young people went to Clearwater Beach. An officer stopped them, said they were out too late and called Scientology officials.

The decision was swift. Kristi's summer vacation was cut short. She immediately would be sent back to California.

Beth found her sister crying in the Fort Harrison Hotel. Once again, Beth was torn. She anguished over Kristi. But if she went to the airport to see her sister off, it would look as if she condoned Kristi's mistake. So she didn't go. "For me to

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Kristi was flown home without even a kiss from her father.

"I cried the whole way home," Kristi said. "Basically, I just felt like dirt. I felt like I had committed the biggest sin in my whole life, and there was no way that I could possibly make amends. It was real, real hard."

As Beth neared 15, she got tougher. She had suffered so many heart-wrenching emotions that she grew numb to them.

So she was surprisingly calm upon hearing some unexpected news:

Her father was in trouble. He had been declared a "suppressive person" — an enemy of Scientology — after pushing for improvements in staff conditions and for refusing to be demoted.

"I was confused," she said. "The organization that my dad had wanted me to be a part of was now telling him to leave."

But even though he was leaving, Dennis Erlich still believed Scientology doctrine. Like his ex-wife, he would not urge his 14-year-old daughter to leave Clearwater.

He told Beth she should make her own decision.

She stayed.

"She had more allegiance to the cult than she did to me," Dennis Erlich said. "And I can only say that that's my doing. Because I was less a father than I was a cult leader to her."

Beth said the church designated a man and woman as her guardians, and she remained in Clearwater, thousands of miles from her mother, father and sister.

Ray Emmons is a former Clearwater police lieutenant who specialized in Scientology affairs and sometimes interviewed people who wanted to leave the church. He said he was surprised at the number of Scientologists who wanted to leave family members behind. "Husbands and wives have been split from each other, and kids have been split from parents," he said.

"Most cases it was the parents that got disenchanted with Scientology, and the child was not. So the parents would leave, and the child would not."

Within a year, Beth had decided she wanted to leave.

She was confused. She told her superiors, and herself, that she wanted to move back to California.

She requested a leave, which her Scientology superiors approved in 1983: Her flight to her father's home in Colorado was arranged.

But on the day of the flight, she was called to the Fort Harrison to talk to the "ethics officer," who deals with people who break Scientology rules. Her guardian was there. He accused her of wanting to leave without coming back. "It was so awful," she said.

Three hours before the flight, they were still debating the point. "I started feeling like, well, they're trying to pressure me to not go."

Finally, she told her guardian, "Look, I'm leaving. I'm going now. Goodbye."

She caught a Scientology bus from the Fort Harrison to the QI and picked up her things. There, a Scientology shuttle bus was going to take her to Tampa International Airport.

She stood outside the QI, waiting. Rain started to fall. An hour before her flight, no bus had shown up.

"I was frantic. I didn't know what to do."

Some other Scientologists came by and mentioned they were going to the airport. She asked for a ride. In the car, one of them turned around and asked: "You do have clearance to leave, don't you?"

She said yes. It was true, but the ethics officer had made her feel as if it wasn't.

"I felt as if I were escaping. I was escaping the pressure. . . . I was escaping these people who were trying to guilt me into staying. And I didn't have anybody. There was no one

there who was trying to help me."

From Tampa, she flew to Colorado. She later returned to her mother and sister in Los Angeles.

Before long, all the Erlichs had left Scientology.

For Kristi and her mom, the break centered on a dispute between her school, which catered to Scientologists, and the church, Kristi said.

Kristi entered a public school in Glendale.

"It was such a shock to me . . . my grades started going down, I became uninterested in school. I actually left high school in the 11th grade because I was really having a hard time adjusting."

After leaving, "I didn't have those stable things anymore."

One of those was the church's insistence on a drug-free environment.

"I really kind of ended up on the streets for a while," Kristi said. She "did a lot of drugs when I first left. . . . It was the only way that I kind of felt okay about myself."

She said she realized she was in a rut, got some counseling and got herself together. Now 23, Kristi is a college student.

Dennis Erlich, 44, regrets bringing his family into Scientology. He now manages a small business in Los Angeles. On the side, he publishes a newsletter for former Scientologists called *The Informer*. He recently wrote:

"I don't know if anyone can comprehend the remorse I feel for subjecting my children to this alienating, warped, repressive environment. I pray our story serves as a warning: **SCIENTOLOGY IS DANGEROUS TO THE HEALTH AND SANITY OF YOUR CHILDREN!!**"

"He's very remorseful," Beth said. "He's always saying how sorry he is."

Now 24, Beth is married and lives in California. She said she recently graduated from college with honors in graphic design.

When she left Clearwater in 1983, she realized quickly she was never going back to Scientology. But some of the doctrines are hard to shake. Scientologists abhor psychiatry, for example, and it took Beth until this summer to seek therapy, to deal with the pain of her unusual childhood.

She said it has been hard to build a meaningful relationship with her father, but she is trying.

"It's not like life is normal. I really don't think it ever will be. That was a really powerful time."

About these stories

■ Beginning July 29, *Times* reporter Curtis Krueger asked Scientology spokesman Richard Haworth eight times for permission to interview Scientologist parents and children. No such interviews were arranged. On Friday, after learning these articles were to run this weekend, Haworth called the newspaper and offered to schedule interviews at a later date, but not with Krueger, whom he called biased. The *Times* said it would be willing to do the interviews today, but declined to switch reporters. Haworth rejected that offer.

The reporter



■ Curtis Krueger covers social issues, Pinellas County politics and the Church of Scientology. He came to the *St. Petersburg Times* in 1987 after working at the Fort Wayne, Ind., *Journal-Gazette*. Krueger, 33, is from Bloomington, Ind., and has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Indiana University.