

# Sect woos recruits among the fairy floss at Easter Show

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AMONG the fairy floss and fun rides at this year's Royal Easter Show, one of the most popular attractions is the Common Ground cafe, a wholefood outlet that specialises in organic breads and barramundi burgers.

The show's website touts the cafe's "unique flavours and energy", calling it "a must for every showgoer".

But the Common Ground cafe is one of several businesses owned and operated by the Community Apostolic Order, also known as the Twelve Tribes, a messianic Christian sect accused by former members of harsh child discipline which in some cases could amount to child abuse, family break-up and thought control.

"The Twelve Tribes is a destructive cult that tears families apart," said a former member, Matthew Klein. "They're using the Easter Show to recruit new members and hand out their pamphlets."

Founded in 1971 in Tennessee by a former carnival barker called Elbert Eugene Spriggs, the 3000-strong group has been embroiled in several high-profile scandals overseas. Members in the US were convicted recently of child sex offences and child labour violations.

"This is a secretive group that's causing grief to a lot of people," said David Millikan, a Uniting Church minister and cult expert. "Their whole history is surrounded by untold stories of destruction."

In Australia, former members tell of child beatings and slave-like working conditions. "It's exploitative," says George, a former ex-member who worked at the cafe in 2001. "You're brainwashed, working up to 20 hours a day baking bread and setting up the cafe, and you don't see a cent."

Mr Klein, who helped set up the cafe in 2001, said there was never any "workers' comp, insurance or superannuation paid ... and it's dangerous work: we were all sleep-deprived and carrying around pieces of steel that weighed up to 500 kilograms, with no proper training and no crane."

The group has 60 members in Australia. Most live on a nine-hectare property at Picton. Members are encouraged to surrender all possessions upon joining. They cannot marry outside the group, and have no access to newspapers, magazines or TV.

"You're told that if you leave the cult you'll go to hell," Mr Klein said. "If you talk out against them, you get cut off from family members who are still in there. And if you kick up too much of a stink, they just move you to one of their tribes overseas."

Harsh discipline is one of the group's central tenets, as detailed in their 267-page *Child Training Manual*. Written by Spriggs (aka Yoneq), the manual claims that "the rod is an instrument of love", and that "you must make it hurt enough to produce the desired result".

Beatings are administered with a balloon stick on the bare bottom or hands, which, the manual claims, produces a pain "that goes deep into the child, right to the heart, like electricity".

"The beatings were quite constant," said Michael Curry, who spent a year at the Picton commune.

"When I got out I went to DOCS with my complaints, but they said I needed evidence."

He also raised his concerns with the Royal Easter Show, "asking whether it was appropriate that this group be at such a family friendly event. They just shrugged their shoulders."

The show's chief executive, Michael Collins, said he was not aware of any complaints. "All I know is that the cafe has been here for 10 years and they're one of the most popular outlets. Everyone loves their food."

Peter Baker (aka Nathaniel), an elder of the Twelve Tribes in Picton, defended the group: "We are devoted believers in Jesus Christ, and we use the Old Testament as the blueprint for our lives."