

## Helping people live cult-free lives

### Lakeville facility gives clients the tools to readjust to society

By Paul E. Kandarian, Globe Correspondent | April 4, 2004

LAKEVILLE -- Danna Birdwell thought she had found the perfect life. She was in her early 20s, attending college in Savannah, Ga., and looking for spiritual fulfillment. She thought the answer was Twelve Tribes, a religious sect she read about on the Internet.

"It was very family oriented, they talked about living naturally, all organic foods," said Birdwell, who now lives at Meadow Haven in Lakeville, which promotes itself as a residence for people who have left "high-control or abusive religious sects."

Twelve Tribes, Birdwell said, "sounded so wholesome and appealing, like a beautiful way to live. I was looking for that." She joined the sect in Georgia in November 2000, bringing with her a son, Sage. "I knew they were Christian from their literature, but I didn't know what cults were. They didn't want bad influences, they had no TV, newspapers," she said.

When she started having doubts, Birdwell said, she was ostracized by sect members, especially the males.

"If you're a woman and you're not submissive, they cut you off, not only from them but from God," she said. Reached by telephone, Twelve Tribes representatives declined to comment on Birdwell's account.

Birdwell said her life quickly became an emotional mess. Her husband, a Twelve Tribes member she married in December 2002, drove a wedge between her and her son when she dared to question the group's motives.

After 2 years, during which time Twelve Tribes moved Birdwell and her family to Missouri, her marriage was failing, she said. In the summer of 2003, Birdwell's husband drove her (pregnant with his child) and Sage to her aunt's home in Texas, and they haven't seen him since, she said. While in Texas, Birdwell said, someone told her about Meadow Haven.

Birdwell said she is still mending emotionally. She and her sons, Sage, 6, and Asher, 5 months, have been at Meadow Haven since September, steered there by her aunt. The center, run by Robert and Judith Pardon, opened 18 months ago, and currently has six residents (eight is the maximum). Among the residents is Karen Robidoux, who in February was acquitted of second-degree murder in the starvation death of her infant son, Samuel, while she was a member of an Attleboro religious cult called The Body. Her husband, Jacques, was sentenced in 2002 to life in prison after being found guilty of ordering the child's starvation.

"I'm grateful for Bob and Judy," Birdwell said. "I've come a long way."

Robert Pardon has master's degrees in theology and divinity, and from 1977-1984 was pastor of the First Congregational Church in Middleborough. Judith Pardon has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in counseling psychology. They also run the online New England Institute of Religious Research, [www.neirr.org](http://www.neirr.org). They said they use a three-pronged approach to cult recovery at Meadow Haven.

The first phase in helping their clients is about "getting them in the moment," acknowledging their spiritual confusion and developing an individual recovery plan, Robert Pardon said.

Next, the center helps people chronicle the trauma of being in a cult, explains the narcissistic nature of cult leaders, and helps them to start rebuilding their lives.

As an example of how the cults work, Pardon related how one member was told, " 'When we get done with you, you'll be like a zero with the rim rubbed out, you'll be totally vulnerable.' People have to reconstruct their identities," Pardon said.

He said the third phase of recovery focuses on reconnecting by looking to the future, building self-image and developing a community integration plan.

Contrary to popular belief, cults do not seek weak-willed people, Pardon said. "Cults don't want high-maintenance people, they want productive individuals who will toe the party line and promote the organization," he said. "If anyone is susceptible to getting involved with a cult, it's middle- or upper-class people, educated, idealistic, and those coming from a Judeo-Christian background."

And it's not easy to leave a cult, much like a battered woman might have trouble leaving an abusive partner, he said.

"It's very analogous to domestic abuse, but this is a whole group," he said. "God is introduced and it's ramped up to an infinite level. It makes it a devastating experience."

Recovery can take six to eight months, Pardon said, but after about a month at Meadow Haven, residents begin to feel settled.

"We have one guy who came out of the Unification Church," which was founded by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, "working 15 hours a day, seven days a week, living in a van doing fund-raising," Pardon said. "When he came here, all that came to a crashing halt and he didn't know what to do with himself. It took almost two months to get him settled down to where we could work with him."

The Pardons say they are devout Christians but don't promote their beliefs to their clients.

"We try to give them tools to make decisions on their own," Robert Pardon said. "We're committed Christians, but the groups these people have been in have been telling them what to believe, so the last thing we want to do is tell them what to believe."

Admission to Meadow Haven is voluntary and costs about \$1,700 a month, Pardon said, but no one is turned away. Some work at the center to pay the fee, and some have part-time jobs in the area, he said.

Birdwell, an attractive young woman with long brown hair, spoke softly about her involvement in Twelve Tribes and how hard it was to leave.

"It's frightful once you've been in an environment where the group is a whole being, they speak as God to you, so to go into the real world is scary," she said, gently bouncing Asher on her knee. "You feel you've betrayed your people, you feel you may die because you left, your children will be destroyed by the world."

"It sounds naive but when it's your whole life, your parents, your brothers, your sisters, their children are like your own children, you believe it's God's will."

"Once you're there, you can hardly imagine you'll ever leave."

She admits she's still not fully recovered.

"I've come a long way since I've gotten here," she said. "Right now, I just want to take care of my children." ■