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Twelve Tribes cult worries parents

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Chattanooga: Yellow Deli draws interest, worries some

by Joan Garrett

Michael Mosteller doesn't know what the strangers said on the day he began to lose his daughter.

He imagines her, with a book or a Frisbee or a guitar, alone on the front lawn of her UTC dorm, as was her custom.

A curious, first-year philosophy major with blonde curls and a tiny frame, the student wondered about the hippie-clad men and women who strolled by her dorm, walking closely, even prayerfully, to and from the new restaurant down the street, a place called the Yellow Deli.

She asked questions, and introductions on a sidewalk soon became daily visits to the restaurant, free meals and late-night conversations about the meaning of life. Her phone calls home made her father believe a spell had been cast over her.

"The more she talked, the more nervous I got," he said.

Then at the beginning of the summer, when his daughter was supposed to return home, tension mounted. She wanted to stay. Her friends at the Yellow Deli, who live communally and work without pay, wanted her to be one of them.

In a time of iPods and Facebook, it was hard for Mr. Mosteller to believe his daughter would abandon her earthly possessions and her education to join a communal Christian sect, one critics have

labeled a cult.

“This is supposed to happen in California. It is not 1960 anymore,” he said.

His concern is echoed by others. Officials at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga have received several calls from parents worried the Yellow Deli and its message too easily may influence impressionable and experimenting students.

But leaders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the deli’s owners who are well versed in controversy, say parents, including Mr. Mosteller, would do well to respect the religious choices of their adult children.

“We have seen parents take radical actions against the children they love in a way that betrays their children, alienating them and separating their children till death,” said Ed Wiseman, a local leader who sits on the Twelve Tribes apostolic council.

INSIDE THE DELI

Ask Mr. Wiseman if he is a cult leader and a smile crawls up his face.

“I think Jesus was a cult leader,” he said, staring with sky-blue eyes through gold-rimmed spectacles. “He was outside the camp of organized religion.”

Mr. Wiseman, who has just returned to Chattanooga after five weeks of travel abroad offering business training to followers in Europe, is well aware of what people say about him and the Twelve Tribes patriarch, Gene Spriggs.

“In the past, I was much more threatened,” Mr. Wiseman said. “I took it personal.”

They left the city more than 20 years ago after several members of the group were taken by cult deprogrammers. Since then, Twelve Tribe communities have been accused of racism, sexism, homophobia and child abuse, according to the group's Web site, which claims the allegations were not substantiated. Members also have been embroiled in child custody battles.

Mr. Spriggs started the Twelve Tribes in Chattanooga in the mid '70s, and the group's communities now are scattered throughout the Midwest and West Coast as well as in Germany, France, Spain, Argentina and England. Members home school their children, endorse the traditional nuclear family and support themselves through cottage industries such as organic farming, carpentry, hostels, small stores and delis.

Legally, they are members of a nonprofit entity that is allowed to operate a for-profit business because they share their money, Mr. Wiseman said.

In some ways, time seems to have stopped for the Yellow Deli and the people who work there. Women with waist-length hair wear no makeup and balloon pants or skirts; the men have beards and tight, slicked buns of long hair.

The appeal of the Twelve Tribes is subtle. Members don't evangelize lunch patrons. The group's literature is on display but not offered, and Yellow Deli events such as the biweekly free speech forum held on the garden patio only touch on the beliefs of the Twelve Tribes when guided by visitors, Mr. Wiseman said.

Nick Cooper, a UTC student who participated in the group's free speech forum last week and is thinking about joining, is one of many students who share their angst about personal relationships with community members.

"I just came back from a family reunion where I tried to talk to my dad and just got one-word answers," he shared with the group. "I tried to tell him about wanting to join the community, but he didn't care."

The few new followers — only one person has been baptized into the local Twelve Tribes community since it opened the deli on McCallie Avenue in April — are drawn by witnessing community and love, not force, said Mr. Wiseman.

“There is no agenda,” he said. “It is not us there, promoting what we believe. We want to start a free-speech movement. The status quo is built around, ‘Shut your mouth and get in line.’”

Yet the basic message of Twelve Tribes has tough requirements: To find salvation people must believe in a savior followers call Yahshua, give up everything they own and get a room in the group’s big house.

“To truly be in the new covenant, a person has to obey what God said,” said Mr. Wiseman, referring to biblical passages about the early church. “They were never supposed to have money and have a house and go to church.”

It is not surprising that parents would be concerned about their children’s involvement with the group, Mr. Wiseman said, but the group does not use emotional manipulation to bypass people’s will. A book the group recently published called “Cult Scare” could help parents concerned about their children’s involvement, he said.

Mr. Mosteller’s daughter “responded to love and the love she found here caused her to give authority to the words that came from here,” Mr. Wiseman said. “We just loved her, just like anyone else who wants a sandwich.”

OUTSIDE THE DELI

UTC administrators’ hands are tied when it comes to the Yellow Deli.

“We have to acknowledge that our students are 18,” said Chuck Cantrell, a spokesman for UTC. “They are adults, and they have to be allowed to make their own decisions.”

All UTC can do to appease worried parents is equip students with information to make decisions, he said. Student programs can teach what is and what isn't a healthy spiritual relationship, but UTC cannot come out against a religious group that has not been charged with anything illegal.

DeeDee Anderson, dean of students at UTC, said university staff and campus ministries have met about the Yellow Deli's influence on students, but there are no plans for cult awareness programs. But if parents continue to call, the university's message regarding the Twelve Tribes may shift, she said.

"They are right there (near campus)," she said. "It is something that we are keeping an eye on."

The Twelve Tribes is not a cult like Jonestown, the Branch Davidians or Heaven's Gate, but they are a high-control group that can destroy people's lives, said Bob Pardon, director of the New England Institute of Religious Research. The institute is an anti-cult organization that runs a transitional facility that has helped many former members of the Twelve Tribes.

Individuals are drawn in by a simple message of love and community, but they should seek to understand what Mr. Spriggs truly teaches before signing their lives away, he said.

"There is a seamy underbelly," Mr. Pardon said. "The group is racist and controls you from the beginning. As time has gone on, they have gotten raked over the coals and have learned to turn a phrase and make what they believe more palatable."

For now, Mr. Mosteller sits on pins and needles. His daughter left UTC to study in Oregon for a year but has plans to return to the Chattanooga campus when her program has finished. She continues to communicate with workers of the Yellow Deli via e-mail and, at one point, was offered a plane ticket to return for the wedding of a couple in the group, said Mr. Mosteller.

"I am petrified. I am horrified," he said. "I was trying to contact anyone and everybody that I knew. It is not just about my

daughter. There are more (girls like my daughter) out there.”

He said he doesn’t know whether his daughter will adopt Mr. Spriggs and his teachings. In the end, though he can take her car and her weekly allowance, he can’t stop her.

“They think they know better about the salvation of my daughter than I do,” Mr. Mosteller said. “There is a certain appeal because they live in a structured environment, and every day is a beautiful day. You don’t have to worry about the grade. You can lay in the grass and look at the stars, and life is beautiful. You don’t have to worry about banking, cell phones or rent.”

“My greatest fear is that she end up there.”

This article was found at:

<http://timesfreepress.com/news/2008/sep/07/chattanooga-yellow-deli-draws-interest-worries-som/>