"Everything revolved around homeschooling, big orgies, hours of late-night lectures, prophecies and fucking Grandpa," says Davida, 31. She has platinum blond hair, plumped-up lips and a look in her eyes that says "I've seen stuff you can't even imagine." I first met her a few years ago, when I was hired to work on a documentary called *Children of God* (airing in September on Cinemax) that was directed by a guy named Noah Thomson. Like Davida, Noah is a former member of one of the world's most notorious cults, the Children of God, presently known as The Family International.

"I always felt so dirty," Davida says about her childhood, when she and many other kids raised in the group were forced to have sex with one another, their guardians and their leader, David Berg (aka Grandpa). "If you hadn't started your period yet, you were required to do everything but actual penetration," she says.

"Children of God"
PROPHECIES

cults. Don’t let things reach that point—many cults today, and you might be more susceptible than you think. By Joshua Lyon

“But if a girl developed physically, that meant she was ready to do the real thing.”

When Davida was 20, she finally escaped with a 21-year-old guy named Ricky Rodriguez, aka Davidito, who, as a kid, was prophesied by David to be the next leader of the cult. The two were like brother and sister, because they both lived in David’s household. Then in January 2005, while Noah was working on the documentary, Ricky kidnapped one of his former nannies (after failing to track down his mother, who was his main target) and stabbed her five times before slit her throat and killing himself. He left behind a heart-wrenching video that blasted the cult and its abuse tactics.

The incident caused a media frenzy. It was the perfect scandal: a cult, a declared prophet turned avenger, sexual abuse, murder and suicide. But the abuse that occurred within the Children of God runs much deeper than that...
"GRANDPA HAD HIS PICK"

David Berg founded the Children of God in 1968 in Huntington Beach, Calif, after he was fired from his posts as minister at a Christian and Missionary Alliance church for alleged sexual misconduct with an employee. His group attracted free-love hippies who were into communal living—Rose McGowan and River and Joaquin Phoenix all grew up in the Children of God—and the organization quickly grew. (Cult expert Rick Ross says the latest reported membership number is about 10,000, but adds that an exact count is hard to determine because the group is spread out around the globe.) David and his wife, Karen Zerby, aka Mama Maria, maintained a secretive, insular household made up of his inner circle—devoted followers who went by made-up names.

"I found a stash of my mom's books, and one was all about child abuse. ... So I took it to my mom and ended up getting beaten for finding it." —Davida

"I would live with people and never know their legal names," says Amy, 34, another former member. "It was a tactic that conveniently made it difficult to find and prosecute members of The Family when the children grew up and started coming forward with stories of abuse.

As its disciples grew, the rest of the organization lived within communal groups, called units, throughout the world. The children raised their children as one big family. They were homeschooled and had to sing for money and do missionary work, spreading the word of God on the streets. All of the cash they raised was tithed and sent to David.

"We relocated every six months," says Davida, "and had to sing for money and do missionary work, spreading the word of God on the streets. All of the cash they raised was tithed and sent to David.

"Sometimes there'd be a orgy night. It was us and all the adults interacting sexually, doing sexy dances. Grandpa had his pick of whoever and however many women he wanted."

"GOD APPROVES OF THIS VERY MUCH"

"I've had people tell me I'm a miracle because I'm actually able to function," Amy tells me. With her long brown hair and kind eyes, she looks like the girl next door, grown up. "I was one of the first kids born into the cult. My dad was only 13 when he met David, right when the Children of God was first starting. My father had lost his dad, so he latched onto David, because he was offering him a family."

Amy, it turned out, had a gift for singing. After the initial contact, many cults pressure you into spending more and more time with the group, while trying to convince you of the credibility of your family, friends and inner voice. You may be told that you doubt and the work of Satan, or that they're due to your weak, moral nature. After a while, a person has no way to judge what's going on," says cult expert Carol Darmo. Before you know it, you might be signing away your bank account, your freedom—or worse.

CHILDREN OF GOD TIMELINE

- 1968 The Children of God is founded in Huntington Beach, Calif, by David Berg (aka Grandpa)
- 1969 David's wife, Karen Zerby, aka Mama Maria, is born
- 1970 Early 1970s "Nutty panties," pornographic photos of female members, are printed and circulated
- 1971 One horrifying public incident, and it's still affecting an entire generation of people in their 30s and early 40s who are now trying to carve out a normal life.
- 1972 The Fanny the "Fanny fishig," aka Maria Gutierrez, born
- 1973 The COG is banned from Argentina for distributing pornographic literature.
- 1974 The COG reorganizes to become the Family of Love.
"25 or 30 of us in a campground," she recalls. "We were called Music With Meaning." The lead musician was Jeremy Spencer, Fleetwood Mac's original guitarist, who in 1971 abruptly left the band to join the Children of God. He helped train these kids to be celebrities within the cult—almost like their own Little Mickey Mouse Club—and they recorded videos that were sent to envious kids in units all over the world.

But there was a high price for that stardom.

"There was a lot of sexual abuse," Amy remembers. "It started right away. At the time I didn't think it was wrong, because the adults would say, 'God approves of this very much.' As I got older, they'd set up 'sharing schedules,' where you'd be assigned to people." And Amy wasn't just having inappropriate sexual contact with the adults. "We were encouraged to have sex with girls our age," she says. "I wasn't comfortable, and it felt like a chore." (In '995, a court in England stated that "Music With Meaning" was a particularly corrupt and corrupting organization. [Jeremy] played a central part in it.)

Once a year, on David's birthday, followers would send homemade striptease videos to him. "From age 9 until 15, I would have to make these tapes," Amy says. "Like all the women, I stripped off my clothes and danced. I remember being very embarrassed, but I would get highly praised, like 'Oh, Grandma Berg is going to love that;'" she says. "He was always writing us letters and commenting on our videos."

"IT WAS LIKE A HAREM"

When Amy turned 13, she was called up for the ultimate starring role: living in David's household. "I didn't leave the house, and I had regular sexual contact with David the whole time," Amy says. "It was kind of like a harem. I'd been trained to revere and respect him my whole life, so it was ...what can you do? I kept getting told I was privileged to be there."

how can you tell if it's a cult?

Psychiatrist and prominent cult scholar Robert Jay Lifton says cults have three defining characteristics:

1. A charismatic leader who becomes an object of worship
2. The use of techniques of "coercive persuasion" or "thought reform"
3. Economic, sexual and other types of exploitation of group members

And expert Rick Ross says hate groups, anti-government extremists and multilevel marketing schemes may all have cult leanings, but by some definitions of the word "cult," so could Trekkies. Rick says that an unsafe or destructive group is not defined by what it believes, but by any "behavior that causes harm and injury to the members of the group and/or others in society."

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We all know about that South Park episode. Here are some more spoofs for your viewing pleasure.

The Simpsons
"The Joy of Sect"
Homer et al. are brainwashed by the Movementans, a group that takes their possessions and feeds them lima beans.

The Simpsons
"Chitty Chitty Death Bang"
Lonely Meg is wooed by suicide-cult babies.

King of the Hill
"Fun With Jane and Jane"
Lonely Luanne is enticed by a food-withholding cult that masquerades as a sorority.

Dude, Where's My Car?
Alec Baldwin and the other guys meet geeky cult members in matching sneakers.

free at last These former cult members broke through the mind control.

"When I was a preteen, I began to realize that things everywhere else weren't like they were for me at home. My parents were in the cult, and I was subjected to their dogma and oppressive control. I ran away seven times, the last time for good at age 14. I went from being an isolated person who hadn't learned social norms to living on the streets of Seattle." — Anna, 30, Chico, Calif.

"I joined [a cult] when I was a sophomore in college. It became very controlling, down to what we ate and what we wore. We had no access to money. We would have to physically abuse one another and we were abused by the leader: He ordered me to puncture my skin with a coat hanger, and
We were told we were the brides of Christ and that no one else in the world wasn't supposed to play sports or get a higher education, but my parents Ultimately compelled me to run away. Leaving was torturous, but by my junior or senior year, thanks to a couple of incredible teachers and classes, I realized I didn't want to go back.

By my junior or senior year, thanks to a couple of incredible teachers and didn't fit the cult mold, and I ended up getting a full scholarship for track. Women had to take my clothes off for money. When guys grope way too much and I should probably be on medical. balloon animals) on the side. A children's entertainment business (face-painting, kids by working for a large tax firm and running a become financially stable enough to take care of her needs. She says that Falun Gong discouraged his parents from seeking medical treatment, accusations also made by the Chinese government. Disrupting meetings between President Bush and the Chinese. The group made it difficult for her to leave. Top officials wore funny uniforms until recently, and the group believes in aliens. Where to find 'em: Los Angeles.

Indeed, many current and former members now say the abuse has stopped. And Amy is trying to become financially stable enough to take care of her kids by working for a large tax firm and running a children's entertainment business (face-painting, balloon animals) on the side. A children's entertainment business (face-painting, balloon animals) on the side.

Davida is having a more difficult time. "I drink way too much and I should probably be on medication, but I don't have insurance," she says. She works as a dancer and nude model, "I loathe having to take my clothes off for money. When guys grope me, I start crying. People say, "You're crazy" and I'm like, I have a good excuse, I'm a nudist model. Thats a profession."

Still, Davida, Amy and Madison have hope and encouragement for people who are thinking about leaving. The Family, and they regularly check in with other former members. "The one good thing about what we experienced is that we all have a brotherhood, or sisterhood," Amy says. "We're throwing a party soon for people in the movement that have come out. People are coming from all over. Everyone is really close because of what we've been through."

KABBALAH CENTRE
Red flags: St. $415, the holy book, Zohar, is perhaps unreasonably priced. A Village Voice story.

In 2004 quoted a man who said he was pressured to spend money, and a woman who said she felt her husband was unduly influenced. The group has a charismatic leader and a silly dress code for men, and it's popular with celebs. Where to find 'em: Hollywood.

Where to find 'em: Peace Palaces in Fairfield, Iowa; Lexington, Ky.; Bethehudes, M.D.; and Houston.

FALUN GONG
Red flags: The grand pooh-bah claims powers of invisibility. A San Francisco activist says that Falun Gong discouraged his parents from seeking medical treatment, accusations also made by the Chinese government. Where to find 'em: Disrupting meetings between President Bush and the Chinese.

DAHN YOGA
Red flags: A woman who said she died of dehydration during leadership training, and

Where to find 'em: Los Angeles.

CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY
Red flags: Intimidation of critics. The St. Petersburg Times ran a story in 2000 in which a former member said the church made it difficult for her to leave. Top officials wore funny uniforms until recently, and the group believes in aliens. Where to find 'em: Los Angeles.

Where to find 'em: Peace Palaces in Fairfield, Iowa; Lexington, Ky.; Bethehudes, M.D.; and Houston.

There have been allegations that members are subjected to mind control techniques. Where to find 'em: Sedona, Ariz.

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS
Red flags: The fallout from child-abuse allegations in the '70s and '80s is mostly over, with the church taking an active role in making amends. Followers still shave their heads and sing on streets in peach robes. Where to find 'em: Los Angeles.

UNIFICATION CHURCH
Red flags: The mass weddings and

Where to find 'em: Hispanic communities.

we know what's up. He's not as gullible as I was."

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