

Ex-cultist says beware of 'simple and subtle' come on

2 By DAN BARRY
Staff Writer

MANCHESTER — Wearing white sneakers and a Black Sabbath rock band button pinned on his windbreaker, the young man standing outside the Manchester Community College library Friday afternoon could have been on his way to an English class.

There really was nothing to distinguish 18-year-old Philip LaFemina from the 50 students who had gathered to hear him speak, except that LaFemina recently spent six months as a member of the Hare Krishna sect.

That was the point he wanted to make.

"Who are the people who join cults?" LaFemina asked through a portable microphone. "They're you, college students who have no intention of joining a religious cult."

LaFemina was invited to speak on campus on the fifth anniversary of the Jonestown, Guyana mass suicide and murder, when more than 900 followers of the Rev. Jim Jones drank a cyanide-laced punch on Jones' orders. The massacre remains the most incriminating evidence of what can go wrong in a religious cult.

Before LaFemina's speech, organizers of the 30-minute memorial played a recording Jones had taped, exhorting his followers to "Get moving, get moving!" In the background could be heard their last screams and moans.

After a moment of silence, LaFemina told his audience that most cult members "are the nicest, friendliest people you'd ever want to meet." He explained how a potential follower is told to cast away doubts, then to give up a "sinful" way of life, and finally, to acknowledge the leader as God or one in direct contact with God.

"It's a simple and subtle process," he said.

But it wasn't until after the ceremonies, at an impromptu news conference in the school cafeteria, that LaFemina, who lives in Willington, spoke about his personal experience with the Hare Krishna. The sect is considered to make use of brainwashing techniques in recruitment.

About two years ago, just before he turned 17, LaFemina and four friends called a



PHILIP LAFEMINA
...college students are targets.

Krishna temple in East Hartford. "We were curious," he recalled, "but we never thought we'd join. That decision came later."

The members in the temple "battered us up," telling the five they were above-average young men who were fortunate that their spiritual calling had come so early. "We kept coming back," he said.

One of his friends then built a makeshift temple in the enclosed porch of his house, and the five began chanting Krishna mantras each morning before going to Windham High School. The friend's father, a widower, didn't really mind, LaFemina said, because he preferred having the boys at home rather than at the East Hartford temple.

LaFemina's family didn't mind at first, either, because some of the Krishna requirements, such as vegetarianism, "really weren't doing any harm," his sister, Brenda LaFemina-Weber, said. But then her brother

began to detach himself from his family and friends.

"He wasn't the same person he used to be," she said.

The family contacted the Guilford chapter of the Citizens Freedom Foundation, which helps families of cult members to cope and, if they desire, try to change the situation. The foundation put the LaFemina family in touch with four deprogrammers, all of whom were former members of Hare Krishna.

Six months ago, the deprogrammers came to the LaFemina home at three in the morning and took Philip to a "safe house" for a week, where they fed him, talked to him and gave him a lot of time to rest.

"It was an eye-opening experience, intense and not enjoyable," LaFemina recalled. The deprogrammers also showed him clips of the sect's involvement with drug smuggling and the storing of weapons, including grenade

launchers and machine guns.

He wasn't reluctant about the deprogramming, he said, despite warnings from other Krishna members who told him he would be forced to eat meat, gamble, and have sex with a prostitute, all which are against Krishna principles.

None of the warnings proved true.

By the third day, he said, what the deprogrammers had to say "began to make sense." After a week at the "safe house," he spent two weeks at a rehabilitation center in the Midwest, then returned home.

Only one of his friends also has left the Krishna sect; the other three are in a Boston temple.

After a half hour of answering questions, LaFemina, a freshman at Eastern Connecticut State University, asked to be excused.

"I have to go register for classes," he explained.

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MORNING -- 214,766

SUNDAY -- 284,968

100 Warned About Cults As Jonestown Recalled

By LISA STENZA
Courant Staff Writer

MANCHESTER — Two years ago, a curious 16-year-old Philip LaFemina entered a Hartford temple owned by the Hare Krishnas.

Six months later his family, deeply worried about his poor eating and sleeping habits, lack of respect for family members and constant chanting, sought help from professional deprogrammers, who successfully turned him away from the Krishnas.

LaFemina, now 18, was the principal speaker at a rally Friday at Manchester Community College observing the fifth anniversary of the mass suicide of followers of the Rev. Jim Jones at Jonestown, Guyana, where more than 700 people died. LaFemina described to the 100 people at the rally how easily he became part of a cult, occasionally drawing parallels to Jonestown. "The kind of people who join cults are out here right now," he said. "They are you."

The purpose of the rally was "to make students conscious of the threat and danger (cults pose) in their own lives," said Wallace Winchell, an English professor at MCC who teaches a course on contemporary cults. "In this area, you do have cults operating secretly."

LaFemina, whose identity was not disclosed prior to the rally because college officials said they were afraid of retribution by Hare Krishnas, said when he and

four of his friends entered the Krishna temple in Hartford, they had no intention of joining. "The decision to join came very gradually," he said.

The Krishnas gradually began to take control of his life, LaFemina, a Willington resident and a freshman at Eastern Connecticut State University, said. "They ask you to give up a few things at a time."

He was not permitted to eat meat or protein and was allowed a maximum of only six hours of sleep a night, enabling the cult's leaders to influence him because his mind "became stagnant," he said.

While LaFemina described his experiences, his parents, Ralph and Lillian LaFemina, and his sister, Brenda LaFemina-Weber, quietly stood near him. "His being a vegetarian was no big deal, but then he began to detach himself from his family and friends," his sister said. "It raised concern in the family — he wasn't the person he used to be."

Although several college security guards were hired to protect him as he spoke, LaFemina, a confirmed Lutheran who now is an agnostic, said he is not afraid of retribution from the Krishnas. "I'm sure I'll meet up with them some time in a debate," he said.

"The people who just come out of these things are the best fit to talk about them," he said.