Coming home from a cult

'I'm so thankful I got out,' says Frances Rufty after seven months in Hare Krishna

By Rose Post

Frances Rufty is home in Salisbury, North Carolina, again — no longer brainwashed, no longer mesmerized, the spell broken.

She's "Frances" again. Dancer, writer, actress. Her new name, "Visnu Murti das," chosen when she joined the Hare Krishna (pronounced HAH-ray KRESH-a-nah) cult for seven months, has been discarded.

So have the sari she wore, the books she distributed, the prayers she recited, the $150 she begged daily from unwary travelers and her total dedication to a strange god and an even stranger lifestyle.

Frances, a Lutheran since childhood, has rediscovered that the Christian church is "a community of people who sincerely love one another." So much so, in fact, that she's wondering how she got hooked two summers ago by one of the nation's rapidly proliferating religious cults, how she managed to surrender her dreams to work to exhaustion, how she dared reject her family.

"I'm so thankful I got out," she says. "I'm so lucky! If I hadn't had a family that loved and cared about me . . . ," she muses. "It just makes me sick to think I did this to my parents and friends."

The daughter of Archibald and Frances Rufty, both attorneys, young Frances went to dancing school, took art lessons, brought home good report cards, learned to cook, dated her boyfriend and attended St. John Lutheran Church in Salisbury with her parents and two brothers.

On the surface, Frances Rufty's story is brief, its outline like that of many others being repeated today. *U.S. News and World Report* (June 14, 1976) estimated that from one to three million Americans, mostly in their late teens or early twenties, are involved in 200 to 1,000 cults.

Frances, 22, knew little about brainwashing, mind control or deprogramming when she left the Charlotte airport June 5, 1976, bound for a summer school session in Denver, Colorado. A promising junior year at the University of North Carolina had just ended, and the dance major had plans for her life — taking courses in New York, writing script and choreography for a children's theater production and serving as assistant mistress of the Salisbury Civic Ballet.

Then she stepped from that plane in Denver, and her life began taking a dramatic new twist.

A girl wearing a sari said, "Hare Krishna," Frances remembers. "So I said 'Hare Krishna' back, and she looked surprised and said, 'Oh, do you know about Krishna?'

"I had read about Buddhism, Zen, Sufism and Taoism. I wasn't 'into' any of them," Frances admits.

"Why," the girl asked, "don't you come to our temple?" She introduced Frances to six other female Krishnas. "Some of them had already been to the school I was going to," Frances says, "and I thought, 'They've got something I don't have.'" So she went.

"The temple was like a church, but everything was marble and beautiful and clean," she recalls. "I thought, 'They're living in an ideal community.' One of the main things that attracted me was the fact that they give up all material things."

Nearby "lots of people lived in one house." Frances and her recently met acquaintances chatted all afternoon. The Krishnas suggested she spend the night with them.

But she was emotionally uncomfortable. "I didn't sleep at all," Frances confesses. At 3 A.M. the Krishnas gave her a sari, "six yards of cloth without a stitch in it." This garment, she was told, was necessary to conceal the ankles because men could become lustful, just as they might react to the sight of hair, so she diligently bundled her curls beneath a scarf.

"Then we went to the temple," Frances says, "and they taught me to chant. I chanted 16 rounds."

A chant, she explains, consists of saying, "Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare." It means, "Oh, energy of the Lord, dear Lord, please engage me in the devotional service." Sixteen rounds means the phrase was chanted 1,728 times.

"I thought, 'What a beautiful prayer,'" Frances recalls. When she had completed her chanting, she bade the Krishnas good-bye, but they seemed certain she

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Frances Rufty demonstrates the Krishna ritual of holy markings

wouldn't return. "They knew I was interested in dance and said a girl at the temple knew all about Hindu dance." Why did Frances need to go to school? She "would be doing something so much higher for God," Frances was assured.

The Krishnas informed Frances, "The whole world should be your family." "They make you see every attachment, every emotional commitment, is a challenge from God," she says. "That was God testing me, asking me, 'Are you going to do this for the world and me or (will you) not because it might upset your parents?'

"I was an idealist," she continues. "I felt if everyone were totally selfless, the world would get better. For so many years I'd been praying, 'My will is thy will. Show me the way.' I felt God had just flung open the door."

So it happened that the day after her arrival in Denver, Frances telephoned her parents to notify them she was not attending summer school after all.

Looking back, Frances says she fully believed she was not harming her parents. "When they were reborn," the young woman goes on, in line with the Krishna tenet about many incarnations, "they would be reborn as Krishna devotees" because of their daughter's dedication.

Her bridges seemingly burned, Frances settled in to becoming a full-fledged Krishna. The group has four injunctions: no recreation, no intoxicants, no sexual activity and no gambling. That "doesn't mean card gambling," Frances points out. "It means, 'Don't think.'"

Describing her new "totalistic environment," Frances says, "For a long time I wasn't left alone. I said, 'This is a prison,' but they'd say, 'Out there is the prison. Here you're free from sins and desires.'"

At any time, the Krishnas contended, Frances could "bloop," or leave. "They call it 'bloop,' like the sound something makes dropping into the ocean — the material ocean, the world of illusion," she adds. They warned her, though, that more dangers existed in that illusory world than in a den of snakes.

"It was so gradual, so subtle, like a dream," Frances remembers. "I don't know where I got such strong conviction. I had no freedom of choice. Your own thoughts are not supported, and if you are not an egotist, 60 thoroughly beaming, brainwashed people can convince you that your personal ideas are wrong."

Often the Krishnas quoted Scriptural passages to substantiate their statements. Now Frances knows, "If you isolate a Bible verse out of context, you can prove anything.

"I was with these people at all times and had to change my lifestyle to such an extent that I had to relearn how to eat, dress and even use the bathroom. Just the effect of changing old habits ... is indoctrinating.

"There aren't any bars on the windows," Frances says, "but I couldn't go."

Being a Krishna meant rising at 3 and preparing for the day in 15 minutes. That included taking a cold shower, *tilak* and donning a sari. *Tilak,* Frances says, is holy clay from the Ganges River. Cult members mark their bodies — temples of God — with it, chanting a different word for "god" with each application.

By 4 they had to be in the temple for a service which extended until 7. They chanted, danced, reported donation totals, made floral garlands and greeted the deity with flowers, lamps and food. An 8 A.M. class in the "holy books" was followed by breakfast, which men and women ate separately.

When Frances moved to the San Francisco, California, Krishna headquarters, the regimen was even tougher. She awakened at 2 A.M., adopted an early morning routine similar to that she'd used in Denver and worked at the airport from 9:30 A.M., pinning flowers on people's clothing and seeking donations. She hated that task, "but if it was the best thing to do for God," she recalls, "I would learn to like it."

No matter what an individual offered, the Krishnas always asked for more. "Phenomenal things happened," Frances says. "One person gave a $110 wad of bills.

"I thought the money was going toward publishing books and temple maintenance. They spent $100 a day for flowers. I used to ask, 'Shouldn't we be doing other things with the money ... to relieve suffering and hunger?' They would say, 'God will take care of that if you do this for him. You can buy a plate of food, but buying a soul for God is the ultimate you can do.'"

Devotees are permitted to read no newspapers, view no television and speak at length only to Krishna

Rufty:

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members. "We had no love for people who were not Krishna s," Frances claims.

By the time the solicitors returned "home," drank a glass of milk and ate a cookie, it was about 9 P.M., and they went to bed. Two A.M. wasn't far away.

The week before Frances left for Denver, her mother had glanced at a magazine article which dealt, in part, with deprogramming: the process of reversing the effects of brainwashing and mind control. The story, she says, mentioned a Rabbi Maurice Davis. Mrs. Rufty telephoned Davis who "said to call and write to Frances without ceasing and try to get her home on any pretense."

But no one could contact Frances. The Krishnas "wouldn't call her to the phone," Mrs. Rufty says.

So it was that when Frances's parents and younger brother arrived for a visit nine days after she had enlisted in the cult, "I saw through Krishna eyes," the young woman confides.

Their visit was devastating. Frances's parents reasoned, pleaded, cajoled, ordered, shouted, cried — and got nowhere. The only time the Ruftys glimpsed the Frances they had known occurred when their daughter inquired, "Aren't you even going to kiss me good-bye?" It was, Mrs. Rufty declares, "awful."

After that, however, they were able to contact their daughter. "We called her constantly. We wrote to her constantly. But we weren't getting anywhere," Mrs. Rufty says.

Shortly before Christmas she telephoned Davis again. "I told him ... she would not come home and asked what we should do."

Meanwhile, Frances was discovering that during the holiday season her donation-collecting hours were longer than usual. "It was a big marathon because there were more people in the airport, and they were in the Christmas spirit," she remembers. "They would give more."

(Alone, she now figures, she probably added more than $25,000 to the bankroll of her spiritual leader, the late Prabhupada, during months of soliciting seven days per week, ten to twelve hours per day.)

On January 6, 1977, though, she had received little money but had handed out too many books. Although they did not "sell" the books, which supposedly cost seven dollars apiece to print, Krishnas were expected to average enough in contributions to cover publishing expenses.

Late that afternoon Frances pinned a flower on the lapel of a woman who, unusually fascinated by the book, motioned a young man over to see. The "interested" woman, Frances would soon find out, was a member of the "rescue team" searching for her.

"Just then," Frances says, "a policeman came over and said I was arrested. He said he had a complaint. I didn't realize he was taking me to a car till I was in it.

"And then I thought, 'Oh, my God! I'm being kidnaped,' and I tried to get out of the car."

Scooting from the airport in a three-automobile caravan, Frances was in the middle car with deprogrammers who went to work immediately. Two lawyers, Wayne Howard and Michael Trauscht, had the lead, and Mrs. Rufty and other rescue team members rode in the rear auto. Mrs. Rufty — who'd arrived by plane at the same airport the previous day, wearing a wig and dark eyeglasses so her daughter wouldn't recognize her — waved at Frances and threw kisses. The kisses didn't move Frances.

Quite the contrary, they angered her. "I could have killed my mother," Frances says.

Frances's deprogramming effort was directed by Howard and Trauscht who, employing conservatorship laws originally designed to protect senile or mentally incompetent persons, arranged through the courts for parents to gain temporary custody of their legally adult children. In a closed court hearing, parents, lawyers and doctors argue that the devotee is a helpless victim of mind control, and if the judge agrees, a pickup can be made by law enforcement officers.

Locked inside a motel room, the deprogrammers began to talk, question, scream, shout — anything that might make Frances think. In an adjoining room, Mrs. Rufty could occasionally hear the refrain, "Think Frances, think!" The young woman hadn't thought for herself for several months.

Frances says reflectively, "At first I wouldn't listen." But, ultimately, she couldn't help hearing, and the questions flooded back to her.

Eventually an ex-Krishna, Robin George, then 18, was called in. And it was conversing with her, Frances asserts, that made her finally perceive what she had done. "I saw the hypocrisy of the movement. Robin talked about the whole philosophy, about people in other temples and those on top. She had seen them. I don't know where the money is going, but Prabhupada (had) several Rolls Royces and (thought) he deserved a gold one."

Amid the deprogramming process, Krishna leaders decided Frances's situation would become a test case. They went to court, charging Mrs. Rufty with kidnap-

Frances and Archibald Rufty spent $10,000 to bring their daughter home

naping, and picketed the San Francisco courthouse, the home of the judge who had signed the conservatorship order, the Federal Bureau of Investigation office and Freedom Ranch, a center for former cultists.

As a result, Frances and Mrs. Rufty, along with a corps of deprogrammers, traveled wildly about the country, stopping here and there, attempting to evade the cultists.

Finally, 18 days after Frances's "arrest" at the airport terminal, she and her mother returned to North Carolina. But their ordeal wasn't yet over. They had to stay in hiding until February 12, when their lawyers deemed it safe for them to emerge.

The price tag is high on what the Ruftys did to get Frances home to Salisbury. The estimated cost ranges from $10,000 to $25,000 for legal services, travel, motels and food.

"We had made up our minds," Frances's mother concludes. "We had to try this. If it didn't work, we would just have to forget her. We didn't know what else to do."

Now Frances is busy relating her experiences via a book she's nearly completed — *Does God Need a Gun?* — and an average of four speaking engagements per week at high schools, colleges and churches.

Although she hasn't fully become "reactivated" in her home congregation, Frances "is very supportive of the Lutheran church," Pastor E. Edward Long of the Salisbury parish says.

The Ruftys did not talk much with Long during their daughter's tenure in the cult because their "situation was the kind of thing about which they were afraid to talk to anyone," Long adds. At one juncture, for instance, the deprogramming procedure was so confidential that Frances' father could not even be told precisely where his wife and daughter were staying. "It was a frightening situation," Long says. "I had to be at *their* level of involvement with *me*."

Frances is determined to share her story with anyone who will listen, I've felt compelled to make these talks," she admits. "It's been a great step of faith for me."

But the sharing has also been an ordeal. On the one hand she feels the threat of Hare Krishna sympathizers. In their fanatic dedication to the cult they have threatened reprisals against former Krishnas who speak out against them.

On the other hand, Frances is equally distressed by the attitude of some people, youth and adult, in the communities where she has shared her story.

"How could anyone be so naive? Or so dumb!" they taunt. Frances Rufty is an intelligent and sensitive young woman and when she was "taken in" by the Krishna cult she was sincerely searching for life's meaning. She is troubled by the ridicule she has received because it betrays a lack of caring and concern for other young people who are at present in danger of subtle seduction by the cults.

"No amount of fear or ridicule can stop me," says Frances as she continues to tell her story and sound the alarm. In the meantime her life has turned new corners. Her own dance school offering instruction in all phases of the dance opened in September. She has choreographed and directed local productions of religious interpretive dance such as Dave Brubeck's "Forty Days in the Wilderness." And early in November, Frances will marry Robert Parkton, a home builder. The wedding at St. John's Lutheran Church, Salisbury, will be further joyous proof that Frances Rufty has come home from a cult. ■