

A FOOTNOTE TO HISTORY: Sheila Ryan's story

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"I FELT LIKE one of those little clowns that you have when you're a kid, one of those inflatable punching bags that you hit and hit, and it always comes back. But this time I thought I wasn't going to bounce back," recalls Sheila Ryan, referring to the murder of her brother, U. S. Representative Leo Ryan, slain in Guyana by members of the People's Temple.

Yet this tragic incident was not Sheila Ryan's first experience with cults—just a few years earlier she had lost her youngest son to another cult. It was this personal tragedy, felt so deeply by the entire Ryan family, that motivated Congressman Leo Ryan to begin his investigation into the whole phenomenon of pseudo-religions. And it was this investiga-

Sheila holds pictures of her brother, Leo Ryan, and son, Ramsey (insert).

tion that led him to Jonestown in November of 1978.

In the spring of 1974, Sheila Ryan Devereux (she has since divorced and uses her maiden name) and her husband of 22 years lived in Pasadena, a conservative, quiet, middle-class suburb of Los Angeles. They were a close Catholic family of moderate means trying to raise four children on a single salary.

Ramsey Devereux, the youngest, was 16 and attended the 10th grade at a nearby Catholic school. "He was a good student, inquisitive, bright and hard-working," says Sheila. "He was sensitive, friendly, outgoing and had a lot of friends."

One afternoon, on his way home from school, Ramsey was approached by a contemporary, a young man who belonged to a well-known cult. The man handed Ramsey a pamphlet and asked if he was interested *To page 52*

in personality analysis. Curiosity gave way and Ramsey took the rest. Answering yes to some of the questions (the rest was worded so that anyone responding honestly would do just that), Ramsey was invited to join this pseudo-religious group. The other youth promised, "It will cure all your problems,

raise your I.Q., improve your memory, creativity, self-control and enable you to be totally free." Intrigued, Ramsey went to an introductory meeting, where members of the church spent several hours trying to convince him that he needed their help. The brainwashing techniques were already in progress.

That first session was free but the next time, Ramsey was told, there would be a fee of \$15. "When Ramsey came home and told me about this, I told him to stay away from the place," says Sheila.

"But it's really interesting, Mom," Ramsey replied. "I want to pursue this."

"I don't think that's a good idea. Please don't," Sheila told her son adamantly. "I didn't know much about cults then," she adds, "but I didn't like what I heard."

But unknown to Sheila, Ramsey did go back.

"He became very intense," Sheila remembers. "He began to question everything, how the world worked, what life was all about. I tried to answer his questions but soon realized I wasn't getting through to him."

As Ramsey advanced in his new-found religion, the classes he was instructed to attend became more and more expensive. In order to meet the costs, the church offered him a position where he earned a small salary. "But he never saw the money," says Sheila. "It was fed right back into the church."

At this time Ramsey was still attending high school and living at home. His involvement with the cult took place after school hours. He came home for dinner and studied in the evening. But as he got more involved with the cult, his grades slipped to failing. "I also began to see a distinct personality change," says Sheila. "He went from a very gregarious, outgoing, friendly kid to an aggressive boy who endured long periods of depression. He developed a blank stare."

Then he started talking about becoming a leader in this church. "This upset the whole family terribly," Sheila recalls.

Ramsey graduated from high school in 1975. When he turned 18 that July, he moved into a house a few blocks away with some other church members. He got a job delivering meat, using a pick-up truck he was leasing from a company which the Ryan family later discovered was owned by the cult.

"He came home often and we talked," Sheila says, "but I didn't see the same happy person. It was as if his mind didn't really belong to him anymore. I saw it happening right before my eyes, but I just didn't know what to do about it."

The visits continued for almost a year. Each time Ramsey grew more and more distant. Then in May 1976, Sheila Ryan received a telephone call from the police. They had found Ramsey's truck near Bakersfield, the gas tank empty, the doors locked.

"Just one day earlier, Ramsey had stopped by to see me but he didn't say much," Sheila says thoughtfully, as if reliving every bewildering detail. "I pleaded with him to talk to me, to tell me his problems, but all he said was 'I'm okay, Mom, it's all right.'"

That was the last time she saw her son—that day in May, three-and-a-half years ago.

Following Ramsey's disappearance, Congressman Ryan began his investigation of this particular cult and then culminated in general. While her brother's investigation was going on, Sheila was continuously harassed on the telephone and in person by Ramsey's fellow cult members. Congressman Ryan's attempts to help Sheila find her son proved futile, but Sheila has not given up hope that her son may one day return.

"I've tried to figure out why this happened to Ramsey," Sheila says. "I ask myself over and over, did I do everything I could have for my son? I don't know why he joined this cult; perhaps it was the fact that he had a great imagination and so much curiosity."

After her brother's murder, Sheila received one phone call from Ramsey. He told her he felt bad about his uncle's death but he wasn't coming home.

Sheila remains hopeful that her son will come home, and she prays other mothers will be spared her agony. "I hope that Leo's murder will, at the very least, keep awareness of cults alive and open the eyes of all parents to the danger of cults before it hurts their families the way it hurt mine." □