



PEOPLE'S TEMPLE

Jim Jones' Temple of Doom

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Special to the Washington Post

Sunday, November 27, 1988; Page D05

Ten years after the events of Nov. 18, 1978, Jonestown's images persist: 914 suicides and murder victims swollen and stacked like lengths of wood; a metal vat on a platform with purple, cyanide-laced Kool-Aid at its bottom.

We cannot forget Jim Jones or his Peoples Temple, though we don't want to think of them. Jim Jones was crazy, we tell ourselves, and his followers dupes. Their story -- bizarre, unique, horrible -- is surely over, a historical curiosity. Yet for those who followed Jim Jones and survived, the story is far from over.

A few of the survivors have met ends as horrible as those who died in Guyana. One shot himself. A couple was murdered in their home by, police believe, their son. Most of the others, after periods of mourning, depression and despair, have created lives which probably resemble the ones they would have lived if they had never known Jim Jones.

I first spoke with survivors in 1979 at the Human Freedom Center, a Berkeley halfway house for ex-cultists which had been set up by Temple loyalists-turned-opponents. They sat leaning toward one another quietly like trees in a grove. When I asked a question -- I was there for the National Institute of Mental Health to see if we might help -- two or three would turn toward me and speak slowly. They were "all right," they assured me -- "considering." Considering that they had lost most of their family members and friends, and the people with whom they had hoped to build a better world.

I have spoken with many such survivors over the years. All of them have come to terms with the enormous losses they suffered and with their own responsibility for these losses. None of them -- and this is extraordinary to me -- regrets the time spent in the Temple. They feel that the experience which altered the course of their lives ultimately helped them to discover who they really were all along.



Jim Jones,
People's Temple leader,
and his wife, Marceline.

UPI photo

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[Survivor: 'They Started
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[The Final Months: A
Camp Of Horrors](#)

[Jim Jones's Temple of
Doom](#)

Go to [The 1970s](#)

Go to [Chronology](#)

Go to [Main Menu](#)

Ten years ago, Archie Ijames, a quirky, independent black preacher who was one of Jones' associate preachers, was in San Francisco shipping goods to Guyana and thinking about going down there, too. Years before, Archie and his wife Rosie had been in search of an apostolic "equalitarian" community to which they could devote their lives; in 1956 they met Jones. Though both eventually concluded "that Jones eliminated God," they stayed. "I was 65 years old and black," Archie explained in 1984, "and everyone and everything I cared about was in the Peoples Temple."

Today he is a widower without possessions, living alone in a loaned trailer, again scrounging and distributing food to the poor, witnessing on the streets of San Francisco. "In the Temple I let my environment shape me," he says. "Now I shape my environment. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God loves me. I'm free as a bird and happy as a lark."

Another man, a precise and thorough person who arranged for the thousand Temple members to go to Guyana, had become a computer programmer. He had never been interested in being a "do-gooder," but he was impressed even in retrospect by the Temple's dedication to integration and to meaningful hard work, and by Jones, whom he regarded as a kind of Nietzschean superman who overreached himself.

"Jim Jones," he told me several years ago, "was entirely concerned with the things that matter in life He said if something is wrong, you have to do something about it He wasn't bound by normal conventions, by a need for food or sleep He was a model for me. And" -- here this careful man shakes his head -- "he had a gift. I saw hundreds, maybe thousands of people who he healed."

Archie's youngest daughter Debbie "grew up in the Temple," and believed that "God flowed through Jim Jones." At 16 she married Mike Touchette, a young white athlete who had been drawn to the Temple's good works. On Nov. 18, she was in charge of Temple PR in Georgetown and Mike was with the basketball team. Ten years later they are living in Florida with their two children. After a period of despair, when they wondered, "if there was ever really a God, how could He allow it to happen," each of them found God "through Jesus Christ."

At first they sound like walking wounded, clutching at a new absolute to replace Jim Jones. But listening closely, I hear the same concerns that brought them to the Peoples Temple. Mike tells me that he is "still a socialist," still concerned with feeding the poor and sheltering the homeless.

Mike's friend Wayne Pietila was always more explicitly political. He joined the Temple at 14, believing that Jones was a revolutionary. He left after seven years, fed up with Jones' hypocrisy -- "he put pretty white ladies in positions of power," and talked "more about suicide than revolution" -- but he was there at the end too, trying unsuccessfully to convince his stepfather and stepbrother to leave.

Now Wayne works as a diesel mechanic and lives in northern California with his wife Lena, a black woman who lost her mother, stepfather, sister and two cousins. "I don't attend church and wouldn't go to a tent meeting," he says. "Somebody has a little charisma and that's how these things get started." Still, his enthusiasm for socialism and his concern with "living your life as an example" is undiminished. His interracial marriage, his passionate social commitments, the friends -- some of them from the Temple -- with whom he shares those dreams; all seem of a piece to him.

Usually when I talk to such survivors, they speak of their present lives, their children, their on-going social concerns. But there are moments when their memories return. Alan details the painstaking work of sending so many people so quickly to Guyana, and then remembers the fate that awaited them there. Mike is overtaken by shame that he failed to stop a man he knew was mad. Wayne is angry at Leo Ryan for provoking Jones by bringing in reporters. Debbie is almost incoherent when she tells me of the despair which led her, on Jones' orders, to buy the cyanide. And there are other moments, when silence fills the room or descends on the telephone, and I know they are feeling the absence of all those who died and the loss of the dream they shared.

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Go to [The 1970s](#) | Go to the [Chronology](#) | Go to the Cult Controversy [Main Menu](#)