How to rescue a cult victim: An interview with Rick Ross, professional deprogammer

A cult expert explains how he saves your loved ones from the grips of cults like NXIVM

By CASEY KLECZEK

PUBLISHED JULY 30, 2022 2:00PM (EDT)

Beth Barham of Corpus Christi looks over a life-size cardboard cutout of Branch Davidian cult leader David Koresh placed on a hill near the Branch Davidian cult compound in Waco on April 16, 1993 as the armed stand-off between the religious cult and federal agents continued. (BOB DAEMMRICH/AFP via Getty Images)

For a year and a half, Elizabeth G. had been living with a high-control, dangerous cult founded by a convicted rapist. But it was in a hospital bed, laying under her mother's watchful eye, that was her greatest torture. At 5'10" and just under 110 pounds, Elizabeth's weight loss and daily panic attacks had become so acute that even her

housemates — members of the notorious Providence cult, a Christian religious group founded in Korea in 1978 — couldn't spiritualize it anymore. They reluctantly allowed her mother to take her to the emergency room, where the attending physician found her at risk of heart failure if she didn't get medical help.

Elizabeth — who prefers to keep her surname anonymous for safety reasons — was at her parent's home for several weeks recovering when she got a visit from her uncle. Walking in right behind him in a suit and carrying a briefcase was a man she didn't recognize, a man her mother had secretly paid and flown in from the United States: Rick Ross, a cult deprogrammer.

Ross is the preeminent cult deprogrammer in the United States and the head of the Cult Education Institute, a nonprofit library with archived information about cults. For the last 40 years, he's made a career out of assisting family members and friends who hire him to help loved ones leave a cult. He's written multiple books about deprogramming, has testified as an expert in dozens of court cases, has been sued and tracked by Keith Raniere, the founder of NXIVM, and was on David Koresh's "enemy list." With over 500 interventions throughout the world under his belt and a 70% success rate, he is considered an expert in his field as cults continue to increase in numbers. (The International Cultic Studies Association estimates there are 10,000 cultic groups in North America, up from 5,000 in 2003.)

There was nothing about Ross' early years that foreshadowed a latent interest in cult deprogramming. He grew up in Phoenix; his father was a Jewish plumber, his mother worked at the

Jewish Community Center, and as a child he was a bright but restless truant. He skipped school so often that his father sent him to a military academy.

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After high school, during a stretch of unemployment, Ross fell into a brief criminal career. First, there was an attempted burglary of a model home with a friend, which was pled down to trespassing. Then, an elaborate jewelry heist that involved a fake bomb threat to get $50,000 worth of jewelry. Ross was sentenced to four years probation. While in jail waiting for a sentence, Ross remembers a rabbi encouraging him to get back in touch with his Jewish faith and to give his grandmother something to be proud of.

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The message struck a chord at a moment Ross describes as his "rock bottom," and after getting out of jail, he started visiting his grandmother in her nursing home every week. It was on those visits in 1982 that Ross felt the nudge towards pursuing what would become his life work—work his "bubbie" could be proud of.

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Outraged, Ross campaigned to have the group's activities stopped, bringing the attention of the group to the home director and the local Jewish community. He wrote up a brochure on the cult phenomenon in Arizona. A year later, Ross started working for the Jewish Family and Children's Services in Phoenix in the prison system creating social services for Jewish inmates. Here, too, Ross discovered that prisoners were a "prime target for cult groups." He started designing a curriculum and teaching about destructive cults through the Phoenix Bureau of Jewish Education. In 1986, Ross left to become a full-time private consultant and cult deprogrammer.

Providence

The Providence cult that Elizabeth was a part of was one Ross was well-acquainted with and had been following for some time. In essence, Providence is a quasi-Christian sect founded by former "Moonie" Jung Myung-seok that grooms followers to be his "spiritual brides." Members sever ties with their families and follow a strict doctrine that enforces sleep deprivation, restricted diets, a rigorous work schedule, and disciplines members to keep painfully slim and dress well. It boasts

over 100,000 followers worldwide and has been operating in Australia, where Elizabeth was recruited, since 1997. Ex-members have reported that female recruits were encouraged to have sex with Jeong for "purification."

Elizabeth was first approached when she was 18 at a bookstore by a young woman who told her about a Christian painting group she was a part of. She emailed Elizabeth photos of the paintings and encouraged her to come to the group which was a front for the cult. She attended the painting group and was ingratiated by the members. She became fast friends with them, joining them for meals and coffee, and attending their Bible study — which, she recalls, was where she was "slowly conditioned on their particular brand of religion."

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Eventually, she became convinced that the cult was the "ultimate truth" and that she needed to dedicate her life to it. She moved into a 3-bedroom home in Sydney where nine of the members lived and was steeped in the lifestyle of Providence.

"The cult worked its members extremely hard—restricted our food intake, drastically reduced our allowed sleeping hours to about 4 per night, and in between working jobs to pay for our rent and food and studying in my case, we had to pray for hours, evangelize on the street, hold multiple

church services and run extra-curricular programs the cult used as front groups to try to recruit more people," Elizabeth says.

Elizabeth recruited members by managing a sham modeling business. "I was supposed to be one of the women who belonged to the leader when he eventually came out of prison," she remembers. Followers had been told he was in prison because of "persecution from Satan," and Elizabeth says she was once flown overseas to visit Myung-seok in prison.

The intervention

Before arriving for the intervention, Ross coached the family not to discuss Providence or its beliefs until he arrived.

"Elizabeth's mother had argued with her in the past about her involvement in Providence," explains Ross, "I had to approach the subject carefully and indirectly at first." When Ross first walked into Elizabeth's home, her alarm bells went off.

"He was very polite. He introduced himself and said he was here to have a conversation about the group I was involved in. I freaked out straight away realizing it was an ambush," Elizabeth says. She left the house immediately, "I remember just before I left, my mum hugged me tightly and I could hear her voice tremble as she said 'please don't run away.'"

Over the years Ross had developed a formula to his interventions, with four basic blocks of discussion: defining a destructive cult,

discussing coercive persuasion and influence techniques, disclosing and discussing specific research about the group and leader, and talking about family concerns. The process typically takes 3 to 4 days, with 6 to 8 hours of discussion a day.

Elizabeth meant to run, but she didn't know where to go. "I was so convinced of the cult being the truth and so terrified to leave, that I came to the conclusion I would need to go back and would probably die. But even so, leaving the cult was never an option," Elizabeth recalls, "I was scared to call the cult and go back right away, and thought maybe I could just endure the conversation." Elizabeth couldn't have predicted how long she would have to endure.

"Rick talked all day. For hours. Non-stop." Like a filibuster, he knew he couldn't cede the floor.

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"We began by discussing cults generally and then delving into coercive persuasion and influence techniques," explains Ross, "The objective was to stimulate Elizabeth's critical thinking."

> **"I was scared of going back to the cult, and I was scared to stay... I finally said, 'Okay, I can see that the group I've been in is actually a cult. Please just give me all the information you can about them. I'm ready to hear it.'"**

"He first started talking about similar cults, not the one I was involved in. I didn't realize that through that he was opening up my mind to realize that my group wasn't unique in its methods and beliefs." Elizabeth tried to block out what he was saying by dissociating and praying inside her head. But the information found cracks in the logic of her group. And it was starting to show. She thought she was going insane. She drove to a parking lot away from her house and screamed in the car. She texted the group leader who immediately tried to book a redeye flight to another city to hide.

"Hours of information was starting to crack open my psychological barriers. At this stage, I was scared of going back to the cult, and I was scared to stay. It was an incredibly confusing, hard time and my body was very weak. Again, I stayed. By the end of the second day of Rick providing information and expertly guiding the conversation to help disarm the psychological traps that had been set up in my mind, I finally said, 'Okay, I can see that the group I've been in is actually a cult. Please just give me all the information you can about them. I'm ready to hear it.'" Ross came well prepared.

"She learned about his history of sexual abuse that he was being imprisoned for, something that the group had previously dismissed as an attack by the devil, and how he was charged with eight counts of rape and imprisoned in South Korea for 15 years," said Ross.

Elizabeth turned a corner after that.

"I learned all I could, things I was never allowed to know the truth about when I was on the inside, and then began the long journey towards healing. Rick stayed one extra day to talk and help support me as I started to understand what had happened to me," she continues. Finally, Elizabeth was on the road to healing.

The evolution of cults

For the first time after forty years — in an industry that Ross grandfathered — he's encountering his limitations. Early in his career — when he was rescuing people from the Moonies, the Branch Davidians, and more — recognizing cults, cult leaders, how they recruit, and what they expected

from their members was more clear. The Charles Mansons, Jim Joneses, and David Koreshes of that time were hauntingly psychopathic, inarguably deranged, and patently abusive to their followers. Recruitment was done in open, public spaces like college unions and music festivals. Rescuing a loved one from their grasp meant kidnapping — *physically* extricating them.

But cults are evolving. Today, recruitment happens online. The targets are difficult to protect — bullied 13-year-olds unknowingly getting sucked into Reddit feeds, Iraq-war veterans with PTSD stumbling across Twitter screeds, or people who have been battling mental illness for years. The leaders, like "Q," are sometimes unknown, perhaps not even individuals but groups, and may never meet their followers. How they exploit people, or what their objective is, is often murkier.

"Online cults are a new and increasing phenomenon," reflects Ross, "They recruit online, they sustain their membership online through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and they even have YouTube videos and podcasts. They Zoom with people and they can get money through PayPal and they just basically run everything online."

This is where Ross has hit a brick wall. While countless family members have called him for advice, no one has retained him for intervention for QAnon or other ideologies and conspiracy theories, because Ross tells them for many of these cases, there is nothing he can do.

"You cannot deprogram mental illness, and you cannot deprogram deeply and sincerely held beliefs that a person has had for many, many years. And so this is a new phenomenon, QAnon is much more nuanced than a typical destructive cult in that many of the people that became involved have a history of psychological and emotional problems," he explains.

A study of the January 6 uprising found that a third of those arrested had been previously diagnosed with either bipolar, paranoid schizophrenia, depression, or PTSD.

"So they were not well," Ross says. "They were already deeply troubled, and so they became involved in QAnon. And there's also a significant piece of Q-anon that are people that have a long history of having deeply held beliefs that feed into the argument on conspiracy theories, whether it would be religious beliefs, anti-government beliefs, conspiracy theories — and those folks, I don't think that I can help."

Waiting for a window

For these loved ones and family members, he doesn't believe hope is lost. However, the advice he has may be too difficult to manage for most.

"I think the main thing is to maintain communication," explains Ross, "Do not cut them off! Keep in touch to communicate with them, avoid arguments, avoid getting into fights, and instead just be present. Be there for them and make sure that they understand that you are there and that you're not going anywhere, that you care about them and want to be in touch with them."

After that, Ross says, you have to " wait for a window — and that would be when that person starts to express doubts, misgivings about what they're involved in. And then you can in a very calm, careful way, present reading material, or they could go online or go to the college education site and read about similar groups."

"And that might help unravel what has happened and help them to see it in a different perspective," he adds. "But until they express openness to, you know, alternative perspectives, you're really going to be banging your head against a brick wall," particularly if they are completely captivated by the group."

For those bearing relationships that have turned toxic in the new age of cults, this advice may be unwelcome. Breaking ties with someone for their distressing beliefs is an emotionally fraught proposition — and you may not be ready to fight that battle. After all, not all of us have the time and patience that Rick Ross does.

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