

# A love-hate relationship with press

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*The University of the Trees is a visionary and intently innovative classroom ... an experimental school for world change. We believe real change must begin with the individual in order for all to be ready to respond to the greater world-wide change which must take place soon."*

— From University of the Trees promotional literature.

**BOULDER CREEK** — Change may be the predominant buzzword at the University of the Trees, but there's one area in which its founder and his students have not changed: their attitude toward the press.

Christopher Hills, founder of the University of the Trees, and members of the spiritual community based on his teachings look forward to newspaper scrutiny like a trip to the dentist.

After a critical article appeared about them four years ago, Hills and members of the spiritual community based on his teaching decided not to grant interviews unless a newspaper was deemed "supportive" or they had to right to see the story before publication to veto "distortions," according to a section on media relations in a handbook for community members.

"Our policy is not to grant interviews with the press unless our trained public relations people feel it is beneficial," reads the University of the Trees community handbook.

Members of the group say the article in the San Jose Mercury News, headlined "Is This a University, A Business— Or a Cult?" caused them to be denied loans and building rentals. Four years later, Hills and group members still say they should have sued the newspaper for libel, and how they will if it happens again.

While it is common for a group to want only positive publicity, what is unusual with the University of the Trees and its related businesses is the lengths to which they will go to stop a story if they feel it will be negative.

People affiliated with the University of the Trees have written three letters to The Sentinel, two of them threatening libel suits and one which accused the reporter of using underhanded techniques to gather information. They have also had their attorney call to insist the story be fair and accurate.

Microalgae Vice President Deborah Rozman and University of the Trees Press spokesman David Dameron talked to The Sentinel for an hour and a half, although Hills did not wish to be interviewed. Rozman declined to have photos taken of any of the group's operations, although one member of the group did consent to being photographed.

Rozman agreed to a further interview only to "clarify" statements she had already made.

She was not pleased when the reporter asked questions not covered in the initial interview, saying, "I thought the purpose of this interview was to go over facts."

One letter, from Microalgae International Vice President Bruce Cryer, threatened to sue The Sentinel if allegedly inaccurate statements by former employees were printed.

"It has been brought to our attention that you have been interviewing certain of our ex-employees...A large number of things have changed since they left. If your article indicates that such information is current, we shall consider this libel, and if there is any deliberate slanting of the truth, we shall sue," read the letter.

A copy of this letter was sent to James Ottaway Jr., president of Ottaway Newspapers Inc., the parent company of The Santa Cruz Sentinel.

A letter written by Rozman, an administrator for Microalgae International, also expressed concerns that only one side of the story would be printed, and it stated, "We will sue if there is one misstatement of fact."

Hills, too, restated his intentions to avenge himself and the University of the Trees if they were wronged in print again.

He spoke to a reporter briefly at a public function in Boulder Creek, during which he took exception to statements made about him by former associates and promised to sue The Sentinel if their claims were printed.

"We know what you have been doing. We know you have been talking to state officials, trying to get us prosecuted," Hills said at one point.

Queried about statements made by former employees, Hills said, "These are lies stated by those who were dismissed for incompetence and have no reality. If you print them, they are inaccurate and we will sue," he said.

Sentinel editors eventually met with

Nancy Powell, the attorney who represents Microalgae International, to go over the facts in the story.

The University of the Trees has a symbiotic relationship with the press.

Spirulina plankton, for example, received its biggest boost because of an article in the National Enquirer touting it as a weight-loss remedy.

Officials at the Boulder Creek-based company lobbied hard to get press coverage when Lee Evans, a former Olympian now selling spirulina, came to town. They also courted newspaper coverage when Microalgae International donated \$1.59 million worth of spirulina to a San Francisco relief agency. Administrators at the Evergreen School — which is run by parents, although partly founded by the University of the Trees — regularly send newspaper announcements of open-house nights.

"We're interested in creating more public relations with the community. It's just a matter of timing. Boulder Creek is a conservative community and not everything we do is going to be understood," said spokesman Dameron of the Trees Press, when The Sentinel first considered doing a story on the group.