



University of the Trees: one man's vision

PUBLIC
SANTA CRUZ

8-20-84

At one time, employment practices were Stone Age

Last article in a two-part series

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BOULDER CREEK — Their philosophy may be New Age, but some of their employment practices were Stone Age.

That's what former employees have to say about working at the University of the Trees, a non-profit school emphasizing research in consciousness, and its spin-off companies, Microalgae International and Light Force Spirulina.

It should be emphasized that not every former employee interviewed had bad experiences in the employment of the school and its related businesses...businesses

whose underlying credo is to help mankind.

And those contacted worked for the group three years ago. (Microalgae officials would not allow The Sentinel to talk to current employees.)

But after talking to approximately 15 former workers or prospective spiritual community members, some definite patterns emerged.

Microalgae International and Light Force Spirulina are spirulina distributorships founded by Christopher Hills, who also founded the University of the Trees. Many of the administrators at Microalgae International are students of Hills or members of the Nuclear Evol-

ution Community, a spiritual group dedicated to higher consciousness and "manifesting Christopher's vision."

Spirulina, a blue-green algae said to be rich in vitamins and minerals, was catapulted into the big time after an article in the June 1981 National Enquirer touted it as a diet aid. Suddenly, Light Force phones were ringing off the hook with orders.

But the difference in philosophies between employees who were members of the Nuclear Evolution Community — many in a supervisory role — and those who were working just to put bread on the table resulted in hurt feelings and mis-

understandings, according to former employees.

People who worked at the businesses three years ago say community members expected non-members to put in the same long hours for sub-minimum wage pay as they did.

Nuclear Evolution members reportedly practiced "Creative Conflict" on workers, a technique one insider said consisted of several supervisors singling out one employee for criticism in front of a group.

Others said there was pressure put on employees to read Hills' books or to join the spiritual community.

One worker who was part of an effort to organize an employees' association was

forced out, say several former employees. Others involved in the aborted union effort say group members became very upset at the prospect of a labor union at Microalgae International.

Deborah Rozman, executive vice president of Microalgae International and a member of the Nuclear Evolution Community, while denying these claims says that confusion reigned during that period of meteoric growth, when Light Force offices were receiving more calls for spirulina than they had distributors to sell it.

Former employee Mitchell Goldstein, who had been considering joining the Nu-

clear Evolution Community, said the way employees were treated was "the last straw" for him.

"For all their talk about feeding the world and good will towards man, they really exploited their employees," said Goldstein, who worked for the University of the Trees as an electrician for eight months in 1981.

Goldstein quit when after several months he did not get a raise he said he had been promised. "I felt they weren't giving me what I was entitled to and I

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experienced this with a lot of other people who had it much worse than I did."

Melody Kepler, a receptionist for Light Force Spirulina for six months, says she was fired for trying to organize an employees' union.

Kepler says Hills and those close to him demoted employees he didn't like and as a result, "people were afraid to disagree with anybody in the inner nucleus."

At one point, several employees met at Kepler's Boulder Creek home to discuss working conditions. The following morning Kepler said she was fired for "incompetence." "They didn't have any problem with my work before that," Kepler said.

Microalgae administrators held a special meeting to assuage employees' feelings, but nothing changed, said former employee John Govsky.

Govsky worked as a negative ion generator repairman three years ago.

"Despite all their talk about warm, honest, open communication, you won't get anything out of them," said Govsky, who left the same month as Kepler along with — he estimates — 10 other employees.

"Their group consciousness is really high. They're always in meetings. If you sneezed, the next day everyone would know about it," he noted.

One person who had kind things to say about his former employer was Santa Cruz resident Nick Preston, who sold negative ion generators — devices which purportedly make air fresher by sending healthy negative ions into it.

Preston said his supervisors at the Negative Ion Research Center "trained me in sales and were very supportive of me."

"When my daughter broke my leg in a skiing accident they went to great lengths to help her," Preston added.

Preston later went on to form his own negative ion generator company using his experience in Boulder Creek.

"I don't want to put them down. They have a way of digging at your ego, but I think there was some truth to some of the things they told me," offered Reenie Haughey, who worked at the University of the Trees Press as an illustrator, proofreader and tape duplicator.

She said Nuclear Evolution members idolized Hills, "and they wanted us to be as good as Christopher."

"They did have hearts of gold, but they tried too hard to perfect themselves," Haughey said.

Other former employees tell anecdotes which reflect a group which is not so much malicious as zany.

A woman we'll call "Cathy" traveled from Illinois with her son to become a member of the Nuclear Evolution Community three years ago. She lived with community members for eight months

during which time she worked at Light Force.

After awhile, Cathy said, "I began to wonder if I was in some kind of funny farm."

One time Cathy's Light Force supervisor told her the Boulder Creek spirulina warehouse had been moved to Hayward.

Later, she discovered the warehouse had been moved three blocks to Forest Pool.

Her supervisor told Cathy he was trying to get rid of some recalcitrant Shipping Department employees "and if they think the warehouse is in Hayward they'll have to find other jobs."

Another former manager at Light Force Spirulina said Nuclear Evolution Community members were given preferential treatment for sales leads over other distributors, contrary to the group's multi-level marketing contract.

The manager said she lost "thousands of dollars" when two members of the Nuclear Evolution Community formed their own marketing chain, or "tree," called The Tree of Light.

That practice was strictly forbidden by contract, the former manager said. "Everybody in the business was expected to follow the contract, except people in the spiritual community, who changed it at whim."

(Cathy and Kepler concurred with the manager's statements.) Rozman emphatically denied the employee's charges about Creative Conflict being used to bully employees, or that workers were pressured to become part of the spiritual community.

She emphatically denied any employee was punished for labor union activity. "Nobody is ever, ever dismissed if they have problems that they want to work out," she said.

"When Microalgae International first started as a business there was a lot of sacrifice involved. There was a lot of confusion involved — I'm not denying that — but businesses grow and people grow."

She said that dissatisfaction and confusion does not exist among employees today.

However, she refused to let The Sentinel speak to current employees, saying she felt the article would be biased.

She also threatened to sue The Sentinel "if there is one misstatement of fact" in the story about the University of the Trees.

Hills, questioned briefly at a public function in Boulder Creek, also denied the former employees' claims.

As for the Tree of Light, Hills said it is not true "that (group members) received more than their share and we can prove it," he said.

Hills said sales leads for spirulina were given out fairly but added, "I have a right to give them out to whomever I want to."

He acknowledged he dislikes unions,

which he said will "probably be the downfall of America."

But he denies firing any employee for this reason. "That is absolute rubbish. It might be their view of things but they were fired for incompetence," he said.

"If you print that we fired someone for union activity, we will sue you for libel," Hills added.

In any case, the situation has apparently changed today.

Sources close to the University of the Trees spiritual community say the group has changed over the years, becoming less closed to "outsiders" and mingling more with the townsfolk.

Community members have gained a reputation as being hard-working, industrious residents who pay their bills on time.

Some members, such as Susan Belanger, owner of Susan's Gift Shop, have their own businesses. Others attend local churches.

But the word "cult" still haunts the University of the Trees.

When directors of the Evergreen School, which is organized under the non-profit auspices of the University of the Trees, tried to find a new home in Scotts Valley last year, residents blanketed the area with copies of a 1980 San Jose Mercury News article critical of the University of the Trees.

Even Boulder Creek residents who laud Hills' business acumen and altruistic philosophy worry how centered his students are on Hills' personality.

Said Rozman: "We're not a cult. A cult, to me, is when somebody calls the shots and tells everybody what they have to do. We're very democratic."

"A cult has a lot of weak-minded individuals. We have a lot of strong-minded individuals."

What's next for the University of the Trees?

Rozman said they hope to work more with local churches in the future, and one Nuclear Evolution Community member said Hills is thinking of moving business operations to Desert Hot Springs, where the climate is better for spirulina.

Philosophically, a clue to their future direction may be found in this passage from the community member's handbook, written by Hills:

By controlling the metabolism of the chemicals in our brain, we can instruct the brain to put ourselves in a state of bliss so that negativity would not exist at all. Imagine what it would be like if even a small group of people could concentrate on producing this state of being, so that it could happen to a whole group of people, not just one superstar like Buddha or Jesus Christ. Now when people have a method to understand this then we can take the next step. Evolution is not in a hurry. This step may take a long time, but who knows?"