

✓ From counter-culture to mainstream

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BOULDER CREEK — They are the town's best-known, best-kept secret.

Members of the University of the Trees have a presence in Boulder Creek that is as ubiquitous as it is mysterious.

Just about everybody has heard about

the group, one of the largest employers in the San Lorenzo Valley.

With its Pine Street campus, businesses spawned by the school's founder, Christopher Hills, and dwellings rented by spiritual community members, the University of the Trees leases an estimated 20 buildings in Boulder Creek.

Two years ago Hills bought Forest Pool, a community fixture for years.

But the group's inner workings remain a tightly-kept secret.

To hear Deborah Rozman tell it, the group has the same concerns as any other San Lorenzo Valley business.

"We're really concerned about the

empty storefronts in town. We need to upgrade the business community," says Rozman, former president of the University of the Trees and an administrator at Microalgae International.

She worried aloud about the "bad reputation" Boulder Creek has had in the past.

"We're working with the Boulder Creek Business Association to see what those empty storefronts in town could sell," said Rozman.

"We have more time now," she continues, "and we want to give more to the local community."

Indeed, after weathering a few storms in the past three years — including a \$250,000 out-of-court settlement for making misleading statements about spirulina — the people at the University of the Trees are putting on a new face: Since we're neighbors, let's be friends.

They hired a public relations spokesman, David Dameron, formerly a book-seller in San Antonio, Texas, to head the University of the Trees Press. Last December they put on a free Christmas dinner for San Lorenzo Valley seniors. They've joined the Boulder Creek Business Association (group member Susan Belanger is its new president) and the Valley Women's Club. The Microalgae International company profile includes a letter from President Ronald Reagan thanking them "for your willingness to help ... keep America on the road to economic recovery," after Microalgae International donated more than \$1 million worth of spirulina, a nutritious algae, to the San Francisco-based International Emergency Relief Fund.

What is the University of the Trees?

First, it is a non-profit, alternative university, authorized — but not accredited — to give degrees in "consciousness."

About 40 students are enrolled in the

University of the Trees

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university's correspondence school and another 20 go to classes at one of the four wooden houses on Pine Street which make up its campus.

Another branch is the Nuclear Evolution Community, a group whose members have dedicated their lives to higher consciousness and eradicated their egos in favor of "manifesting Christopher's vision."

It is a series of businesses run primarily by Nuclear Evolution Community members who view it as part of their service to humanity.

Its most successful product is spirulina plankton, a type of seaweed grown in highly alkaline lakes.

While there is no legal tie between Microalgae International, the school and the University of the Trees spiritual community, there is an intense personal tie. Many employees are either attending classes at the university or are members of the spiritual group devoted to "manifesting Christopher's vision."

The combined businesses employ about 100 people locally, according to Rozman.

It is the University of the Trees Press, which sells tapes, books, negative ion generators and devices, including a pendulum which can "find missing persons, lost objects and precious metals."

The University of the Trees also founded Evergreen School, a private elementary school now run by parents where children learn techniques of "creative conflict" — Hills' system of conflict resolution — and meditation along with reading, writing and arithmetic.

The University of the Trees is a collection of commercial and spiritual ventures so intertwined it is difficult to tell where one leaves off and the others begin.

Employees of University of the Trees businesses are invited to read Hills' books and attend the group's Friday night meditation sessions.

By the same token, those who become members of the spiritual community are made partners in the University of the Trees Press, after which they are paid in shares of a common ownership trust.

With its multi-level marketing company, constant "up" messages and spiritual overtones, the group could be called the Amway of the counterculture.

Behind it all is Hills, 56, the British philosopher, world traveler and former spice merchant who came to Boulder Creek in 1973 to found the ecologically-named University of the Trees.

Hills declined to be interviewed by The Sentinel, although Rozman agreed to speak for the spiritually-oriented community which runs a nationwide business in holistic health products.

"I've always thought the purpose of a university is that it should spawn technology for the betterment of mankind," said Rozman, one of Hills' first students.

Rozman had attended the University of Chicago and UCSC and was doing research on consciousness and children when she attended one of Hills' lectures 10 years ago.

"I was writing a book at the time, and it sort of evolved from there," Rozman says.

Hills "had a very brilliant mind," said Rozman, describing him as "very caring and very dedicated." Her involvement with the University of the Trees grew from there; today Rozman is one of the so-called Inner Nucleus, the community's spiritual marriage who take the most responsibility in the group.

About 50 persons have made a commitment to joining the University of the Trees spiritual community.

"Our whole focus," Rozman said, "is on serving humanity."

The course of serving humanity, however, is an arduous one and the life of those who join the Nuclear Evolution Community is akin to life on an Aquarian-age kibbutz.

A handbook written for community members in 1980 lays out a schedule regimenting their lives from 7 a.m., when they attend their first group meditation, to when they go to sleep at night.

Their dinner partners were scheduled, and if members wished to speak to one another apart from the group they needed to make an appointment to meet at mealtime, preferably by passing notes during the morning meditation. They got one "free" weekend a month.

The community has evolved quite a bit since then, said Rozman, and the members of the spiritual community have, at their choice, much more free time than three years ago.

But their lives are still nothing if not devoted. Students who opt to become members of the Nuclear Evolution Community agree to practice Creative Conflict, attend Friday night sessions, morning meditations, business meetings and to

do not permit (them) in any of our houses or buildings," reads the guidebook.

Not all employees at University of the Trees-related businesses are members of the spiritual community, but nearly every member of the spiritual community works at one of the businesses.

It is expected as part of Hills' view of "karma yoga" — selfless service designed to break down one's own ego.

"It is a test of selfishness to work without monetary reward," stated the 1980 guidebook.

Members of the spiritual community used to work long hours for little or, in some cases, no pay, but this, too, has apparently changed in recent years.

Said one Boulder Creek businessman, "I used to think the kids who were involved in it were working for nothing, but now I see a very, very astute business community. I know that there's multi-millions running through that business."

Rozman stresses that people who join the spiritual community voluntarily agree to abide by its rules.

She says the group's intensity and dedication is sometimes misinterpreted. "This is a small, conservative community," Rozman said, adding that it is "a mistake" to lump together employees and members of the spiritual community. "It's different for everybody ... we work mostly normal business hours," said Rozman.

MONDAY: Former employees tell a different story about the University of the Trees.

spiritual from the world," reads a portion of the updated Community Guidebook.

The group chooses new leaders once a year by throwing the I Ching, when leaders who have served three years retire.

Group members agree not to smoke, take drugs (including marijuana) or receive food stamps.

"The position of the University of the Trees Community on marijuana and other consciousness-raising drugs is clear: we