

The Paradise Project

Michael Wolloghan talks with Adrian Norman about his documentary on cults for high school students.

V*isions of Paradise* is an absorbing, thought provoking documentary that aims to educate high school students about the nature of destructive cults. Indeed, Adrian Norman's documentary couldn't be better timed.

From alleged cover ups of sexual assault by the Australian branch of the Church of Scientology to police raids at Agape Ministries in Adelaide, charismatic cults and their followers have become facts of Australian life.

The documentary explores not only how four cult members felt and thought during all stages of their involvement, but also features interviews with notable experts in the field of cults. The discussion of the subtle allure, power and structure of cults in this documentary is incredibly ambitious but the comprehensive explanation of the cult experience works well on several levels.

Curious high school students will find the often dark and dangerous world of cults fascinating. Hopefully, learning the major warning signs of destructive cults will protect them from possible future manipulation and deception.

I spoke with Norman, a former member of the controversial Kenja group, about the creation of his documentary and his front line activism exposing destructive cults. He is a confident, caring and compassionate individual committed to developing teenagers' critical thinking skills. Naturally, any attempt to help teens make better decisions and avoid being manipulated should be highly commended.

Q *Firstly, I'd like to ask about the title of your documentary, Visions of Paradise. It's quite intriguing. Why*

did you select that title and how did your documentary come about? What inspired you to make it?

A David Millikan, a Uniting Church minister who I interviewed for my doco, said that everyone is looking for "a kind of paradise". As my documentary is about four people's search for a paradise on earth which unwittingly lands them in different but ultimately very similar mind control cults, I thought this was a good title.

The initial idea for the documentary came from Cult Information and Family Support in Sydney. I had been in a cult myself and had got in touch with someone whose daughter was at that stage still in the cult. I went to a CIFS meeting and they mentioned that they had always wanted to find someone who could do an educational documentary on cults that could go into schools. At the time I was working at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. I had never made a film before but I

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had made a lot of theatre, so I took it on board as a project. Of course, I'd thought quietly to myself that if I, as a teenager, had known a bit more about how cults work I would not have been so sucked in. So I found it a very worthy idea that I put my entire energies behind. Little did I know how difficult it would be. But, after a few years hard work, it's done and being sold around the world. I'm very happy that the word is getting out about how cults work.

Q *Could you tell us more about your experience with destructive cults?*

A I was involved for a period of about seven years with a cult called Kenja which was set up by an ex-scientologist Ken Dyers and his partner Jan Hamilton in 1982. I didn't know at the time that Dyers had been a scientist and that the techniques he used to control people were from scientology.

The way I got involved with them was interesting. I had just dropped out of uni and wanted to become an actor. I met this charismatic actress named Jan Hamilton at the then Stables Theatre in Kings Cross. She invited me to do a clowning workshop and then I started doing classes with her. Soon after, this much older man, Ken Dyers would come in to the clowning classes to give small talks to us on time, space and energy. A little time later Jan gave up her career as an actress and devoted herself to his 'work'. And those of us doing these clowning classes one day found ourselves members of an organisation that had Dyers as the leader and Hamilton as his offsider and we were all hell bent on recruiting people. Of course, we'd been sold on the idea that what Ken was saying was like the word of God. It wasn't - we were in a cult.

Q *What do you believe is the main theme developed in your documentary?*

A The main theme in *Visions of Paradise* is that all people are vulnerable and susceptible to being recruited into cults. We are social animals, this is part of our genetic hard wiring, and we are coded to obey authority and adjust to the expectations of others. These social vulnerabilities leave us open to the destructive mind control that all cults use.

Q *One of the important and unique aspects of your documentary is that it is focused on communicating to high school students. Why did you primarily want to do that?*

A Young people need a heads up about how cults work to control minds. It's for those young adults who are about to leave the relative safety of school - where everything is controlled for them - for the chaos of life after school which seemingly has not so many rules at all. This can be quite confusing and even daunting. Young people, as we know, are incredibly idealistic and can see the world in black and white. There are plenty of 'life solutions' out there that offer a way of life that can be incredibly attractive. A 'vision of paradise', if you like.

Q *Did you have any qualms about tackling the subject of cults? Were there any rules you set for yourself about what you would or wouldn't discuss on the subject?*

A Yes, very much. Cults that are still going are incredibly litigious. As we know, say anything bad against scientology and you will expect a letter from their lawyers. I was concerned about being sued for defamation. So, in order to fly under the radar, I asked everyone I interviewed to not name names. This was also because I

wanted to draw a connection between different types of cults in that they all use the same mind control techniques. Also, of course, I respected the privacy of those who had been in cults and were brave enough to talk to me. Some things that happened to the subjects of my documentary were unbelievably damaging. I just didn't want to go there. This doco is not an exposé, I should say, it's an educational documentary that explains how cults work. It's not about all the crazy, unbelievable acts various cults have convinced their members to commit.

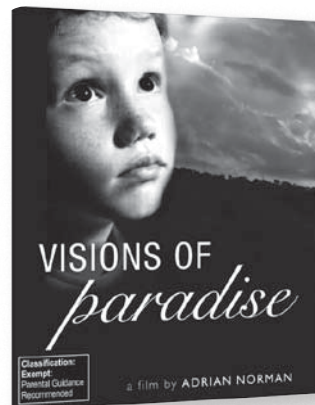
Q *How long did it take to complete Visions of Paradise?*

A It took about three years to complete. It was like completing a gigantic jigsaw puzzle where you didn't know what the final picture was you were trying to create. As I was working at AFTRS at the time, I had some fantastic help on how to put all the content I'd captured into a coherent and compelling narrative. It was much, much harder than I thought it would be. But I think these types of projects are always like that.

Q *How did you select your interviewees and what kind of research did you do for the documentary?*

A Everyone I interviewed had been put forward by CIFS, so I knew that their lives were back on track

and they could talk about their cult experience with the wisdom that comes from distance. I did a lot of research on each of the cults that the subjects had been in, this was in the form of internet research. The internet is a fantastic repository for views on groups that are controversial. You'll find the main website of a group that purports to be doing good work for society. And then if you dig deeper you might find sites where ex-members give their views on what really happened behind the facade



the cult spins. As you do this research, it's surprising how similar all cults are. It seems that absolute power corrupts absolutely in each case. Cult leaders, by definition, have this absolute power, they are accountable to no person on Earth but maybe to God, to whom they have a direct line of communication anyway. So what they say is gospel.

Q *What problems did you face in making the documentary?*

A Well, even though I had no budget, other than a small loan from CIFS, it was an extraordinarily expensive exercise. I wanted some archival footage from the ABC and from Film Australia. This turned out to cost more than all the other costs combined.

Another interesting problem was that I actually interviewed six people who had been in cults. I was interested in getting a cross-section of different types of cults. I realised as I was editing it, that an audience would not be able to follow six different stories, it's just

too much. So I had to cut two stories out: one about a man who had been in a commercial cult, a pyramid selling type group, and a woman who had been in a new age cult on the north coast of NSW. There was just no way I could fit everything in.

Q *One final question. Do you have any other projects currently in the works?*

A I have got some ideas for a doco project on the nature of belief that I'm working on. Stay tuned!

Note: *Visions of Paradise is available through Ronin Films, www.roninfilms.com.au*

About the interviewer:

Michael Wolloghan is a member of the NSW committee of Australian Skeptics and an investigator of cults and strange religions.



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