

Heaven's Gate revisited

by J. Harry Jones

SAN DIEGO - Ten years ago next week, one of the strangest events in San Diego County history exploded into the public's consciousness. For several days, it was the biggest news story in the world.

It began unfolding the afternoon of Wednesday, March 26, 1997, during a period when the Hale-Bopp comet could be seen in the night sky.

HEAVENSGATE - 'We didn't know what to expect going in there,' said sheriff's Deputy Robert Brunk, who returned to the site of the now-razed Rancho Santa Fe house last week. He was the first to arrive in 1997. Photo by Nadia Borowski Scott. HEAVENSGATE - Mark Malamatos, a medical examiner's investigator, caught his breath while helping unload bodies at the Medical Examiner's Office in Kearny Mesa in 1997. Photo by Eduardo Contreras. HEAVENSGATE - Autopsies showed the 39 suicide victims at the Rancho Santa Fe house, 21 women and 18 men, died by eating pudding and applesauce laced with drugs. Photo by Nelvin Cepeda. Inside a mansion in the upscale neighborhood of Rancho Santa Fe, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult lay dead. Convinced that a spaceship was traveling behind the comet and that they would be transported to the vessel to begin a new life "beyond human," they had poisoned themselves. Twenty-one women and 18 men died by eating pudding and applesauce laced with phenobarbital and other drugs - the largest mass suicide on U.S. soil.

All went willingly under the guidance of their leader, Marshall Applewhite, also known as "Do."

Their bodies were discovered by a former cult member who had received videotapes in the mail telling him that by the time he watched them, the group would have moved on.

Rio DiAngelo, whose real name was Richard Ford, drove with his boss from Los Angeles to the mansion. After looking inside, he placed an anonymous phone call to 911 that dispatchers initially found inconceivable.

"I don't think anybody really believed what the person was saying," said Robert Brunk, a sheriff's deputy who had just started his shift at the nearby Encinitas station. "It was an anonymous call to the communications center stating that 40 people had committed suicide and they were cult members. It came out as a 'welfare

check,' and they had held the call for a while because it was busy."

Brunk went to the address, 18241 Colina Norte, which turned out to be a 9,000-square-foot, two-story home up a 200-foot driveway.

"As I'm driving, I'm thinking to myself, 'How am I going to explain to the people that live there the purpose for my visit?' "

But when he arrived, things seemed odd. All the windows were closed and the curtains drawn. Two vans parked in the driveway were rented, a dispatcher confirmed.

Brunk found an unlocked door on the side of the house. When he opened it, the stench nearly knocked him over.

He shouted that he was with the Sheriff's Department, then backed out and waited for Deputy Laura Gacek, who arrived in a separate patrol car.

"We didn't know what to expect going in there," Brunk said. "You start thinking of cults and all sorts of things start playing in your mind - animal and human sacrifice, that kind of thing.

"As we entered the house, we started seeing bodies that were covered up. ... Every room that you went into, we found more. Some were in bunk beds.

"They were all in their running suits with their 'Heaven's Gate Away Team' patch on the sleeve. There was a computer flashing 'Red Alert,' sort of like 'Star Trek.' There was still a load of laundry in the machine. It was surreal."

Purple shrouds covered all but two bodies. Brunk remembers lifting the shroud off only one person, among the youngest. He also remembers shaking a foot of every body to check for rigor mortis. All were wearing black Nike running shoes with the white swoosh on the side.

"The Nike symbol triggers my memory more than any one thing," said Brunk, a 17-year veteran. "I remember their shoes, all 39 pairs."

Later, Brunk and Gacek gave their supervisors a complete account of what they had found.

"It was kind of like a Kodak moment as we watched their jaws drop," Brunk said.

The two deputies were taken to a hospital to be examined in case they had been exposed to anything toxic. On the trip there, the driver asked what was happening.

"After I told him, he looked at me as if thinking, 'Maybe we're taking you to the wrong type of hospital,' " Brunk said.

DON CRIST AND MEDIA

Hanging on the walls of Capt. Don Crist's office at the San Marcos sheriff's station are two large, framed photographs. One is a panoramic shot of the largest news conference ever conducted by the Sheriff's Department. It took place in an auditorium on the Del Mar Fairgrounds the day after the bodies were discovered. The other picture is of Hale-Bopp in a desert sky.

Crist and the late Ron Reina headed the sheriff's media office.

The media storm began to hit about 5 p.m. the day the bodies were found, after word of the suicides leaked. It was unlike anything that had come before for the department and would be rivaled only by the Santana High School shootings four years later.

The local media arrived, followed in the next two hours by hundreds of reporters and photographers who raced to "The Ranch" from Los Angeles. The Academy Awards had been held two nights earlier, and many national and international news crews were still in town.

Crist remembers driving to the mansion. It was dark out, but there was a glow visible from miles away, as if a stadium had been floodlit for a sporting event. It was the lights from the TV satellite trucks.

"I came over the hill and every person in the world was there," he said. "People were running up to me, asking what I knew. Local media, Korean, Japanese, German. ... I had never experienced anything like that."

The next day, the Sheriff's Department made a bold - and, within the department, controversial - decision to release a 90-second videotape shot the night before inside the mansion. The news conference was attended by hundreds, but as the tape began playing, "you could hear a pin drop," Crist said.

Showing the video clip had the unintended effect of denying DiAngelo a big payday. The former cult member also had videotaped the scene in the mansion, in hopes of selling the tapes to news outlets. The news conference made his footage worthless.

The story was front-page news in virtually every newspaper in the world. Television networks ran specials. The cover of Time magazine featured a close-up photo of a wild-eyed Applewhite and the words, "Inside the Web of Death." The cult was parodied on "Saturday Night Live."

DETECTIVE RICK SCULLY

In the homicide unit, where they usually play things close to the vest, the decision to release so much information at the news conference made investigators uncomfortable. But within a few hours of examining the scene in the mansion, Rick Scully said, investigators were confident about what they were dealing with.

Scully, a veteran homicide detective considered among the best, was the lead investigator for Heaven's Gate. So many bodies was a challenge, but as a whodunit, it was easy. After obtaining a search warrant, and after a hazardous-materials team had determined the air in the house was safe, Scully and others went inside.

"It was like being in the Twilight Zone," he said. "We were wandering from room to room to room, and every room we went into we were finding bodies. You're thinking: 'When is this going to end? How many bodies are going to be in here? How many rooms are there to this place?' Because every room we went in had bodies stacked up like cordwood."

He remembers thinking: "How could people do this to each other. What kind of person led them to do this?"

"Then we got to the final room. Marshall Applewhite, aka Do. It was the upstairs master bedroom, a huge room, and he had the bedroom to himself. Great big bed. He's all propped up with pillows around him.

"As soon as you walked in, you knew this guy was the head chief. He was the leader."

THE CULT AND ITS LEADER

From a follow-up report written by Scully:

"The members of Heaven's Gate adhered to a strict doctrine. Members led a regimented lifestyle. Particular attention was paid to: punctuality, cleanliness, orderliness, personal possessions, how to dress, what to eat, how to phrase a question, and, most importantly, desires. Each member was assigned a partner to watch over him or her in order that they could constantly fight their 'human desires.'

"Their beliefs were a hybrid of science fantasy (UFOs and aliens) and Christian beliefs. Essentially they believed that God and the Kingdom of God were extraterrestrial. They believed that they descended from this extraterrestrial kingdom and took occupancy in human bodies some 20 years or so ago. They believed that they had learned all there was to learn of the human condition and that it was time to return to the kingdom from where they came."

The cult was renting the mansion, which was razed a few years later. The name of the street also was changed.

Some of the Heaven's Gate members earned income for the group by providing computer services and Web site design through their company, Higher Source.

Before coming to San Diego County, Applewhite and his followers had lived a nomadic existence, trying to stay ahead of cultists' families. Most who died had joined during the 1970s, but eight had come to the group in the 1990s. Members ranged in age from 26 to 72. More than half were in their 40s.

Many of those who joined had been searching for answers and goals, family members said. Applewhite offered a simpler, more focused way of life that also isolated group members from the outside world and fostered a shared belief system. Some left behind children and spouses to join the group.

"The investigation revealed that (the decedents) were ardent followers of Do, Marshall Applewhite. ... Members wrote that their only purpose was to make Do happy," a Sheriff's Department report concluded.

Together they ate their final meal March 21 at Marie Callender's in Carlsbad, Calif. Their orders were identical: salad and chicken pot pies, with cheesecake for dessert. The next day, working in shifts, they made their exit.

Six weeks later, two male cult members who had not been at the mansion attempted suicide at an Encinitas motel, using phenobarbital and wearing Nikes. One died; the other was found barely alive but survived. Nine months later, his body was found in a tent in the Arizona desert, a suicide.

CORONER'S OFFICE

Russell Pryor and Michael Ellano, both forensic autopsy assistants, had the job of processing and unloading the bodies from refrigerated trucks, as dozens of photographers recorded the scene. A photo of the two of them, on a break and looking exhausted, was printed in newspapers across the country.

Christina Stanley, now the chief deputy medical examiner, was in her last year as a fellow in training.

Stanley conducted 11 Heaven's Gate autopsies over several days. All were easy because all died from poisoning, she said.

But the first male body Stanley examined caused her to worry about her skills. She couldn't find the man's testicles.

"As a fellow, I thought, 'Boy, am I just bad at finding these?'" she said.

"I remember (another doctor) was there, and he said he couldn't find any testes on these people either. So I thought, 'OK, this is real.' "

Applewhite and six members of the cult had been castrated in Mexico a few months earlier - another way to deal with unwanted desires. Overview: cults today

Janja Lalich, a sociology professor at California State University Chico and an expert on cults, said the appeal of cults is still strong.

"I think there are plenty of groups still around," Lalich said. "This is just a part of life."

Many people are looking for answers in a fast-paced world, Lalich said. Some get what they need in mainstream religions, while others find the framework they are seeking in an alternative religious movement.

"At some level, it helps people to latch on to something," she said. "People are looking for a quick fix. A lot of groups will offer that panacea."

The growth of the Internet has expanded people's capacity to find groups they otherwise might not have been aware of, Lalich said. The Internet also has enabled detractors to better provide warnings about cults.

Lalich said it is good to have more information available to those thinking of joining.

"If only people put as much thought into joining a cult as they did in buying a car," she said.

- Anne Krueger

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