

How I escaped the cult that destroyed my childhood

Hope Bastine was brought up in a “free love” community where sexual abuse of children was rife. As her abuser is finally brought to justice, she speaks to *Sharon Hendry*

Portrait by Dan Kennedy



For

years I have suffered from raging insomnia, and as usual I was pacing the streets of my local town centre fuelled with adrenaline after a poor night's sleep. I found myself in front of a drab police station and suddenly there was a eureka moment.

I was ready to break the codes of the deeply secretive religious organisation I had been born into and tell the story of horrific, repeated abuse that has haunted me for over 40 years. So just like that, in 2004 I walked into Watford police station and reported to the desk: "I want to talk to somebody about some abuse please."

When I sat down with the interviewing officer, he asked me: "Why now? Why has it taken you so long? Why didn't you come to us before?"

I told him I had started therapy and was trying to put my life back together. He just pulled back and put his pen down before telling me he often dealt with post-therapy complainants who had memories that were hard to validate. I completely and utterly lost it then and there. It would take another six years before the police finally began investigating my abuser — Derek Lincoln, a member of the Children of God (CoG) cult.

And now, a further ten years later, Lincoln has faced judgment day: last month he pleaded guilty in a Scottish court to repeatedly raping and sexually abusing me and another woman decades ago when we were young girls.

At last, after rebuilding my life by studying for a psychology degree and with the help of therapy, I can talk about my ordeal: how I was born into a cult that openly condoned sexual relations with small children within its warped "God is love and love is sex" doctrines.

It begins with my mum, Peace. As soon as she was able, she left an abusive home in north London to become an au pair in France. She was vulnerable and ripe for grooming so it's hardly surprising that when she wandered into a Paris park one day in 1975, she immediately fell for the charms of my dad, Fabien. He was out "witnessing" (trying to win converts) for the local CoG commune after leaving the French navy.

She remembers him getting down on his knees to get her attention. Mum was smitten and dropped everything to join the sect. She didn't even say goodbye to her employers.

It was this sense of immediate belonging that appealed to my broken mum and countless others. You could travel anywhere in the world and land in another CoG commune populated with strangers and

instantly be welcomed with open arms. After a greeting with the "holy kiss", you were immediately part of the community. That sense of belonging was clear manipulation, of course.

But in the early days Mum was just happy to be loved, and by the time I came along in 1979 my parents were embracing a hippy lifestyle, hitchhiking through the French Alps and eventually settling in a hut near Pau, a city close to the Spanish border. Mum was just 21.

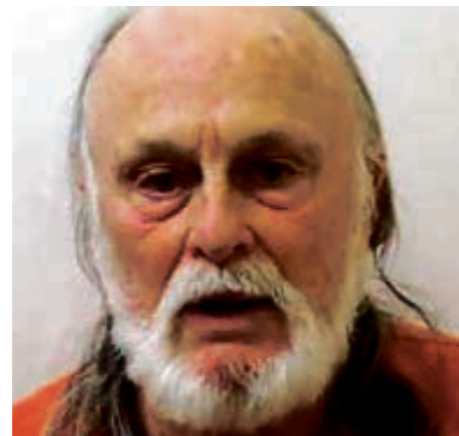
I loved my dad and have some happy memories as a toddler of splashing in crystal-clear mountain streams with him. We were dirt poor, but by selling the CoG's religious tracts my parents just about managed to feed me and my brother Stephen, who was a year and a half younger.

But unbeknown to Stephen and me, we had another father who was the ultimate decision-maker in our family. His name was David Berg, or "Grandpa" as we were taught to refer to him. He was the CoG's founder and leader.

The son of strict Pentecostal evangelist preachers, Berg had taken his own brand of American evangelism to Huntington Beach, California, in the late 1960s and attracted an army of disciples from the hippy counterculture. Drug addicts and dropouts were drawn to his heady mix of Christianity, radical politics, apocalyptic doom and free love.

By the 1970s there were thousands of CoG members living in 130 communes around the world.

Berg saw himself as the "Endtime Prophet" — the anointed messenger of the coming apocalypse — and we, his followers, were God's Elite Endtime Army who would lead a lost world and its "systemites" in



"I froze with fear. I was trying to scream but my voice box was not working. Later, he held his hand over my mouth"

need of salvation in their darkest hour.

In reality Berg was a highly disturbed alcoholic paedophile churning out endless psychotic rambles, but I was too young to know that at the time. Early on he cleverly used music as bait to snare a younger generation. The doctrines of free love were also appealing and might have seemed harmless to outsiders — but those of us on the inside were living a darker reality.

We were growing up in a highly sexualised environment where adults openly had intercourse in front of us, and sexual play was encouraged among prepubescent youngsters and practised between adults and children.

Berg communicated his warped so-called prophecies by writing letters. He published nearly 3,000 "Mo Letters" (he liked to call himself Moses David) over a period of 24 years — and they were the only literature we were allowed to read. He was preaching sentiments such as: "I don't know what the hell age has to do with it when God made 'em able to enjoy it practically from the time they're born."

By 1976 he was encouraging female followers to expand the "law of love" (a euphemism for sexual sharing among members) and to act as prostitutes to bring men into the group. He called this "flirty fishing", or FF-ing (pronounced eff-eff-ing). Birth control was outlawed, which led to a surge of illegitimate "Jesus babies".

We began spending time at an isolated farmhouse commune close to Toulouse, about 100 miles from Pau. It was run by Lincoln, who was originally from Newcastle and had struggled with heroin addiction after leaving the army. He had found salvation in Berg's teachings and paired up with a fellow CoG member called Lovelight. They had three children.

Lincoln's smell was the first thing I remember and I can't get it out of my head — ever. It was musky, but with an acrid, overpowering aspect. He was well-built and covered in tattoos that told stories of lovers and past allegiance to the army. There was the typical sword-through-the-heart type of image.

He always tried to wear his hair back in a ponytail, but was completely bald on top. And he had these big green eyes that were magnified by very thick glasses. His eyes were always the first thing I saw, and he would use that as a means of control, saying things to me such as: "I can see through walls, I can hear through walls. I'm always



STOLEN CHILDHOOD
From far left: Hope (playing guitar) and her brother Andrew enjoy a rare Christmas with their maternal grandmother in 1994; Hope, 8, Stephen, 7 and Andrew, 2, in Goa, 1987. Opposite: Hope's abuser, Derek Lincoln

Unlike our parents, who made decisions to leave their former lives behind, my brothers, sisters and I had no way out

watching you." During any kind of gathering, I could always see him looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

We used to go and visit the farmhouse for what was called "fellowship" with other CoG members. It was really just hanging out on a Sunday, but then Lincoln (his religious name was John) sent a formal invitation to our family to join his commune.

The atmosphere was always heavy with this toxic free love, but my father was very much in love with my mother and he really struggled with the sharing practices. It wasn't long before he disappeared from our lives and left me vulnerable to a man who would abuse me and other children multiple times over the coming years.

Much later, someone would ask me: "Why didn't you tell your mum?" That question is just unbelievable to me because she was always there in the same commune, sometimes even in the same room. But mentally she was in another place and usually pregnant. She would go on to have seven children with Lincoln after his "wife", Lovelight, fled without trace soon after we moved in.

The most salient memory of the first abuse is being on the bed furthest away from the door, near the farmhouse window. There were these large rocking beds that had been handmade by Lincoln, who once worked as a carpenter.

The adults were having "fellowship time" downstairs — basically a mass orgy — along with music and reading the latest literature from Berg. People would be speaking in tongues and allegedly receiving prophecies. It was all very frightening for small children to witness.

Lincoln would use the excuse of checking to see if we were asleep. I remember him kneeling by my bed on my left side and touching me intimately. I was in that state when you're just falling asleep and I just froze with fear, my toes curling and my legs stiffening. I knew it was wrong and unpleasant, but I lost my voice. I was trying to open my mouth to scream or to call out, but my voice box was not working. Later, he held his hand over my mouth.

From then on Lincoln remained a dark and looming presence that never went away. Over the next 12 years, he abused me almost every week, sometimes twice a week and even during periods of illness, such as the time I was bitten by a spider and developed a fever.

In the 1980s we lived with him in India, where we moved through communes in Hyderabad, Goa, Cochin (now Kochi) and Delhi. During this time I was forced to perform an erotic striptease that Berg asked to be videoed and dispatched to him.

The first so-called blessing happened when I was eight years old. An older woman in the commune taught me, my five-year-old sister and our three-year-old friend how to perform a striptease. We had no clothes on except for little scarves. I have this memory of it falling off while being forced to dance with a man in his forties who was the commune's leader.

"Oh, it's fallen off," I gasped, and he replied, "Oh, that's OK" and continued dancing up close to a stark-naked little girl.

At night I would contort my body in a bid to fall asleep with my arms covering as much flesh as possible. It was the beginning of a lifetime of insomnia. I was always lying

awake, waiting for the abuse to begin because if I wasn't prepared for it, it was much more traumatic. So I would wait until he was done and then I could fall asleep.

As the sexual abuse ramped up, so did Lincoln's control over us. Every hour of the day was scheduled. He would even tell us when to go to the bathroom and he would take us all. For once Mum became very worried about me because I would refuse to go to the bathroom and would hold it all day long. The alternative was him watching me.

At approximately 7am each day we would have "devotions and inspiration time", an hour of singing and reading the doctrine before breakfast. Then it was "Jesus job time" — cleaning the house, minding children — followed by witnessing or some sort of weak attempt at an education. As the eldest I was always working.

Once a week we had a movie night, which was our only exposure to outside media. We were never allowed to watch TV or read any material from the outside world, and our lives were dictated by myriad rules passed down from Berg. Only three sheets of paper allowed when visiting the toilet, no white sugar, all fruit soaked in saltwater.

We were conditioned to follow the rules and knew no other way. Unlike our parents, who made decisions to leave their former lives behind, my brothers, sisters and I had not chosen this way of life and had no way out. We were controlled by fear of all outside systems, including government, police, doctors and social workers.

And of course there was constant terror on the inside too. As a former army recruit, Lincoln was suited to the regimented ➤

CoG life and his schedule was enforced with the threat of violence if anyone stepped out of line.

There was no space at all for questioning or freedom of movement — and there was always corporal punishment. It would be spanking and enforced silence. Once I was locked in a room for quite a lot of time, several days at least. These were periods of intense indoctrination listening to Berg's tapes.

There was also no sense of having a future or striving for something better because we were being taught to prepare for Armageddon. The CoG published a book called *The Survival Handbook* with a central character called Survival Sam. We got training and went out into nature reserves to prepare for the End Time.

We were always on the move because of "persecution" by the authorities. There was a constant state of confusion. We didn't know people's real names or those of the places we were living in — a deliberate



BRAINWASHING Sexual abuse was normalised in the cult's cod-religious publications

attempt at avoiding prosecution that would prove problematic during my own quest for justice years later.

When I was 11 we arrived in Scotland's first CoG home at Kilwinning, north Ayrshire. There were up to 50 of us living in a six-bedroom farmhouse and it felt like a pressure cooker. Lincoln was the designated disciplinarian and took sadistic pleasure in making us queue up

outside the bathroom for our spankings. By now he was out of control, molesting every single girl in sight.

Lots of things were happening at that home, including underage pregnancies happening in the cult that needed to be covered up. It was hell on earth, but there was always this complete sense of helplessness because we had no contact with the outside world.



Then in 1994 the cult founder Berg, who had been on the run from the FBI for years, died. And the next year Lord Justice Ward presided over a custody case involving another CoG child that involved intense scrutiny of the cult's practices. It included testimonies of horrific abuse from Berg's own granddaughter and painted a damning picture of CoG life in the 1980s. But ultimately Ward said he was satisfied that the sexual abuse of minors had been stamped out by the early 1990s.

It felt like a betrayal. The one opportunity for thousands of abused children to be rescued had been lost and there was no follow-up. Despite scrutiny in one of the highest courts in the land, CoG leaders still had free rein to use and abuse us.

Still wary, though, the CoG had excommunicated Lincoln from the commune we were then at in Ledbury, Herefordshire, and Mum had finally found the strength to leave and move to nearby Ross-on-Wye. There we had a short-lived period of happiness before my beloved brother Stephen drowned in a freak canoeing accident. Of course, Mum saw it as a curse and drifted back into the religious vortex.

Reeling from my brother's death, I joined a CoG singing group and hitchhiked around Ireland before joining another commune in Edinburgh, later moving to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and Germany. In Bosnia I became heavily involved in humanitarian work and began to view Berg's teachings as hypocritical and abusive.

Finally, in 1997 at the age of 18, I could leave the CoG without my mum's permission. I jumped on a bus from Prague to London one morning in the early hours with just a small bag. Back in the UK, I started rebuilding my life from nothing.

My thirst for knowledge was never-ending and for years I read nonstop until I secured a place in college, first to study psychology and then a PGCE. I was studying by day and working in a care home by night to make ends meet.

Sadly, one of my brothers, Andrew, who also left the cult, could not escape the trauma it had inflicted and took his own life in 2004. And I too found some patterns of



LOST SOULS Left: one of two buses used by the Children of God in England in the 1970s; the cult's founder David Berg, who died in 1994

I intend to become a beacon for other survivors of abuse; proof that they don't have to live in silence and shame

control were harder to break than others — by 2000 I was in a violent relationship with a man who ended up in prison by 2010. It had been six years since I had walked away from Watford police station feeling crushed, and I asked the officers dealing with my ex if they could pick up my case against Lincoln.

This time I was taken seriously and things escalated. By 2014 lawyers were ready to extradite Lincoln from France where he was living with a new partner. They told me: "These are horrific crimes. You deserve justice, you are going to get justice and we need to get the best outcome possible." This meant trying the case in Scotland where there was the best chance of corroborating evidence.

Lincoln was arrested in October last year and held on remand in a Scottish prison while awaiting trial. It was very important to me to have my day in court looking into his piercing eyes one last time, but from a position of empowerment. His plea of guilty to multiple rapes of me and another young girl was, I convinced myself, "a win". I have been vindicated in my fight for justice after all these years.

I have refused to stay silent because it exacerbates the internalised shame and the mistaken idea that we somehow made our

abusers do it to us. CoG leaders gaslighted children into believing that it was our fault for flirting with these men to make them molest us.

Romantic relations are really hard for me, but I want to connect with the good stuff in life now; I want to have a healthy relationship to prove that I'm OK.

I'm studying for a PhD in psychology at the University of Nottingham and I intend to become a beacon for other survivors of abuse; to be proof that they don't have to live in silence and shame. And I want to raise awareness about the lack of child human rights in cults, where fundamentalist faith eclipses the unconditional love and protection that a parent is supposed to provide.

As a child born into CoG, I did not have the freedom to express my thoughts, feelings and opinions. I didn't have the right to an education or medical treatment. Our stories are so extreme, few believe us — and that makes our recovery an incredibly lengthy and complex process.

These days CoG has re-branded itself (see panel) as The Family International: "An online Christian network of individuals in nearly 80 countries, committed to sharing the message of God's love with others."

Who knows what really happens within these so-called networks, but there are still cults operating around the world where children are powerless to speak out.

I will never be silenced again. These days my phone is my constant companion. After so many years cut off from reality, it gives me the power and confidence to venture out into the world empowered. I know that if anything happens to me, I have this small object in my pocket that can protect me. It helps me to explore the world and remind myself: "I'm OK. I'm safe now. I'm not broken." ■

For information and support, visit mind.org.uk and victimssupport.org.uk

The Children of God

Founded amid the counterculture of 1960s California, the Children of God started as Teens for Christ, a small organisation run by David Brandt Berg, who came from a family of devout Christian evangelists. Berg taught Bible classes from a Christian coffee shop, preaching messages of salvation and God's love, but also of distrust in the outside world and of a coming apocalypse. By 1969 he had amassed about 100 followers, and the group became the Children of God (CoG).

In the 1970s the cult established communes across the world, including outposts in the UK. Members would proselytise in the streets, distributing pamphlets and singing songs to bring people into the faith. During this time the CoG claimed that it had 10,000 members in about 73 countries.



CULT APPEAL Young Children of God devotees in Los Angeles, 1971

Berg communicated with his congregation through a series of nearly 3,000 letters in which he established himself as God's prophet and spread what he called the "law of love". Sexuality was seen as holy and heterosexual relationships between all church members were encouraged.

"Flirty fishing", where women of the church were invited to proposition men with sex to bring them into the faith, was introduced in 1976. In her autobiography, Berg's daughter Deborah described this practice as a "worldwide prostitution network". It is estimated that members had sexual contact with 224,000 people before flirty fishing was officially discontinued in 1987, in part due to the Aids crisis.

In 1978, owing to reports of sexual assault within the church, disagreements over flirty fishing, financial mismanagement and the leadership's abuse of its authority, Berg dissolved the existing CoG structure. About 300 leaders were dismissed and many members left the movement. Those who remained became known as the Family of Love or, simply, the Family.

A number of celebrities spent part of their childhood in the church. The parents of Joaquin Phoenix followed the CoG, abandoning it in 1977 when Joaquin was three as flirty fishing began to gain momentum. Rose McGowan's family were also members. At the age of nine she and her siblings fled with their father, who feared they would be sexually abused. One adult convert was former Fleetwood Mac guitarist Jeremy Spencer. He left the band in 1971 to join CoG and appears to still be

affiliated. There have been a number of sexual assault allegations against him.

After Berg's death in 1994 his widow, Karen Zerby, assumed leadership of the group. A new governing charter was adopted in 1995 that confirmed that the "sexually or physically abusive mistreatment of a child" was an excommunicable offence. The group is now known as the Family International, an online Christian community of 1,500 members in approximately 80 countries.

Statement from the Family International

The Family International has had a zero-tolerance policy in place for three decades for the protection of minors. Regrettably prior to the adoption of this policy, cases occurred where minors were exposed to sexually inappropriate behaviour. This was addressed in 1986 when any contact of a sexual nature between an adult and a minor (defined as any person under 18 years of age) was officially prohibited and subsequently in 1989 declared an excommunicable offence. The Family International has expressed its apologies on numerous occasions to any members or former members who feel that they were hurt in any way during their membership.

We continue to extend our sincere apologies to anyone who experienced anything negative or hurtful during their childhood or time as members of the Family International. We wish them well in every way.