



"These people are still out there, and it makes me mad," Brigitte Rittenour (at home with, from left, children Abby, Julia and Alton) says of her alleged abusers.

# Lessons in Fear

Former Hare Krishna children, angry and suing, charge they suffered physical and mental abuse in sect schools

She was just 5 at the time, but Brigitte Rittenour thought she was embarking on a glorious adventure. Her parents, Gerard Calippe and Judith Ann Fairless, had joined the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, commonly known as the Hare Krishnas. A Hindu-based sect founded in 1966 by Indian-born A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, its shaved-headed, saffron-robed disciples were

omnipresent in the waning days of the Age of Aquarius, dancing and chanting their way through the world's cities and airports, preaching peace, love, vegetarianism and self-denial—and soliciting funds.

Krishnas were urged to have their children indoctrinated from age 5 at one of the group's dozen or so boarding schools, or *gurukulas*, around the world. And so, on March 27, 1974, the day after her



In 1976 Rittenour (right) posed with a friend at the Dallas Hare Krishna school.

COURTESY BRIGITTE RITTENOUR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUDY WALGREN



COURTESY VILAS SILVERMAN

Vilas Silverman (right, in Potomac, Md., ca. '81) says she received regular beatings.

fifth birthday, Rittenour's parents dutifully transported their only child to the Dallas campus. "I recall being very excited about my first plane ride," says Rittenour, now 31, a twice-divorced mother of six living in Brownwood, Texas. "Since my parents were optimistic about the opportunity I was about to be given, I was looking forward to it."

The glow was fleeting. For the next two years, Rittenour claims, she endured a mental, physical and sexual hell that, by comparison, renders a Dickensian workhouse quaint. Evidently she was not alone: Rittenour is among 100 gurukula alumni who in June filed a \$400 million federal child-abuse lawsuit against ISKCON, current and former officials and the estate of the sect's founder, Swami Prabhupada, who died in 1977. They accuse ISKCON of condoning and concealing a horrific catalogue of abuse. According to the complaint, students were cut off from their families and allegedly molested, forced to perform sex acts, denied heat, hot water and toilet paper and fed meager, insect-ridden meals. Some, plaintiffs say, were also subjected to brutal punishments—beaten with



CAROL T. POWERS

"I cannot tell you how painful it was," Silverman (at home, left, measuring daughter Anastasia, 13, for a dress) says of the abuse. "I'm in therapy three times a week."

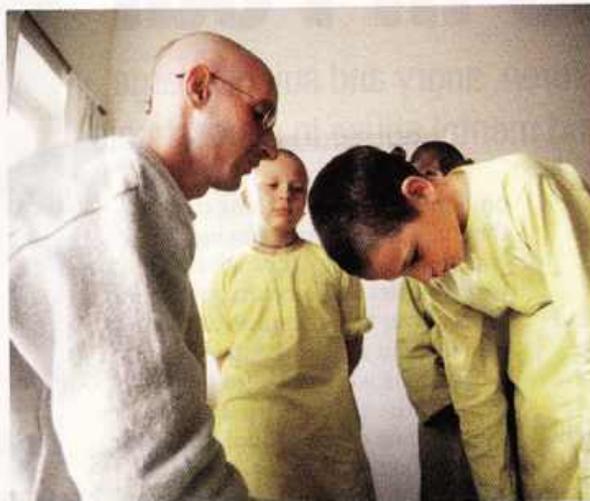
tree branches, scrubbed with steel wool, locked for hours in dark closets and forced to drink "sacred" cow urine. Even when stricken with malaria or hepatitis, ex-students claim, they were denied medical care.

The plaintiffs' Dallas attorney, Windle Turley, says his clients are only a few of the victims. "There may have been close to 2,000," he says. The stage for the suit was set when Turley was contacted last year by concerned ISKCON insiders who had heard stories of abuse. When word spread of a potential legal action, plaintiffs began to come forward and bare their scars. Homemaker Vilas Silverman, 31, of Gaithersburg, Md.,

spent 10 years in gurukulas and says she was raped at age 12. Still, she believes the worst abuse was psychological; she recalls being threatened with having her hands cut off for behaving badly. "They would make us put our hands on a block," says Silverman. "Then at the last second they would say they would give us one more chance."

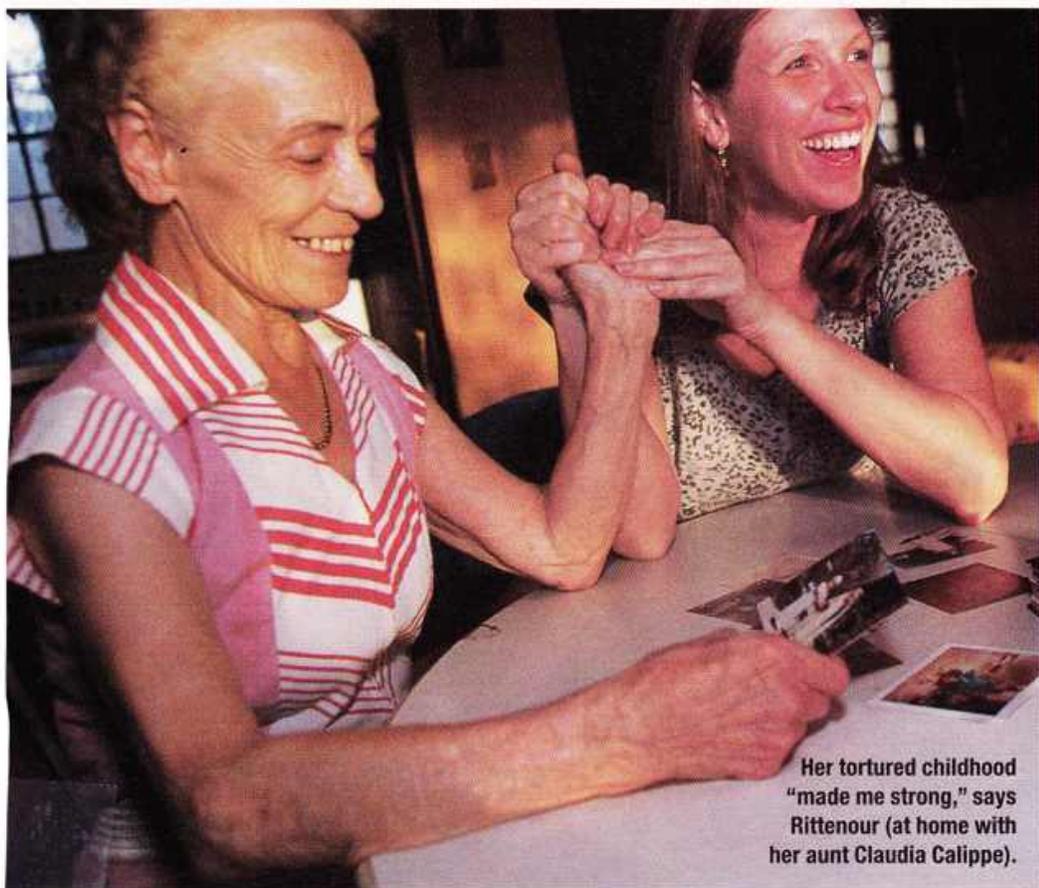
Tracy Gleaves, who was 7 when his parents placed him in the Dallas facility, also remembers real physical pain, doled out especially by one tormentor. "He was careful to hit us where the bruises wouldn't be visible under our clothes," says Gleaves, 28, a Mesquite, Texas, landscaper. He adds that he managed to avoid the sexual abuse the man inflicted on other children. (The man later pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting a minor.)

For its part, ISKCON admits abuses took place at some of its schools, all of which have closed. But the sect, which has 350 temples in 71 countries, denies it sanctioned or covered up the offenses and claims it has fully cooperated with authorities—even forming a Child Protective Office to investigate abuse allegations. "We have tried to take a lot



AMIT BHARDWAJ/NEWSPHOTOS

In India this year, a Krishna student is checked for cleanliness.



Her tortured childhood "made me strong," says Rittenour (at home with her aunt Claudia Calippe).

of steps to address this abuse," says spokesman Anuttama Dasa, pointing out that the sect offers counseling and financial support to the abused and that it has reconciled with the cultural mainstream. Members now hold regular jobs and send their children to public schools. "Me, I drive a Mercury Villager minivan," says Dasa. Even though he says a large jury award would bankrupt ISKCON, he insists money is not the sect's chief concern: "The real issue is healing this community."

Rittenour, for one, is unmoved. "ISKCON is still responsible for what happened, and I want the world to know," she says. "Maybe then we can all put this behind us." Looking back, Rittenour recalls her shock when she realized her parents were leaving her alone at the Dallas gurukula. "I just remember being very scared those first few days," she says, adding that when a staffer would announce "it was time to go to the doctor," she and other girls were taken to a room, stripped and blindfolded. Then, Rittenour says,

unseen people would molest them. "Was I raped? I honestly don't know," she says. "I only know that it hurt a lot, and I was terrified."

At mealtimes, children sat cross-legged on concrete and ate off squares of waxed paper. Breakfast, says Rittenour, consisted of cold oatmeal, often tainted with cockroaches that the kids called "flying dates." For lunch they were given a cup of broth and a slice of bread. Dinner, she says, was usually a piece of fruit. Her gurukula offered no standard schooling, only a daily indoctrination in dogma. Staffers told their charges that people outside the sect were evil, referring to them as karmies, demons or meat-eaters. "We were told if we misbehaved," Rittenour says, "they were going to give us to the karmies and they would eat us."

Her world began to brighten in 1976, when she was 7: Her parents, who had been living in Los Angeles and had begun to hear of abuses at the school, came to live on campus. "It was a huge adjustment," she says, "accepting these strangers as my par-

ents again and learning to trust them." Soon they removed her from the school, which was closed later that year for not meeting state codes, and took her back to L.A. There Brigitte was sporadically home-schooled and helped her father at his flea-market jewelry stand. She felt out of place among non-Krishnas. "It was hard to let go of the fear toward meat-eaters," she says. "Very hard." Relations with her parents, then still devotees, were strained. "I loved them," she says. "But I didn't like them."

At 12, Rittenour, depressed over her social isolation, attempted to overdose on cough and cold medicine. When she was 15, and back in Texas, her mother and father arranged her first marriage, to a 38-year-old Krishna. "I hated my life with my parents so much, I actually

began to see the marriage as a kind of escape," she says. The union—legal in Texas, with parental consent—produced two children. Divorced in 1986, she wed pilot Alton Rittenour, now 35, the next year and had four more children before the marriage ended this year. Brigitte, who has held a variety of jobs, now stays home with her kids, striving to provide them with the ordinary comforts she never enjoyed. She has had occasional contact with her divorced parents—her father, 59, works in commodities in San Marcos, Texas, while her 64-year-old mother lives on medical disability in England. Both still practice Hare Krishna traditions.

Rittenour came forward after reading of the lawsuit on the Internet. Now a Baptist, she struggles with the concept of forgiveness—for her parents as well as her alleged tormentors. "I guess getting to that point will always be a work in progress."

● Richard Jerome  
● Anne Lang in Houston, Karen Grigsby Bates in Los Angeles and Brian Karem in Washington, D.C.