

All in the Family

by MATTHEW HAYS

Mirror

Mention the word cult and certain things come to mind: children trapped in bad situations, their images caught on the news; cheesy made-for-TV movies in which demented older men take advantage of the mentally anaemic; and, of course, Kool-aid.

Local filmmaker Abbey Neidik was only too aware of the stereotypes and preconceived notions surrounding cults, so when he decided to profile the Family, formerly known as the Children of God, he set out to present the religious group in as fair and as balanced a manner as possible.

This, of course, was no small order. The Family has a bizarre and notorious history, a celebrity which peaked when an international police crackdown led to arrests around the world after child abuse charges plagued the group.

The Children of God began in the late '60s, when a renewed spiritualism was born out of the liberation movements of the time. Made up of a motley crew of ripples and dropouts, the group travelled North America and Europe, picking up converts wherever they could. By the late '70s the group had 50,000 members.

But along with the impressive numbers came the increasingly strange practices of the group's leader and prophet, "David Berg, who argued that women within the group should sleep with men, the resulting orgasms helping to convert the men to Jesus Christ (he dubbed this practice 'flirty fishing').

The Children of God also became fraught with charges that children within group compounds were victims of sexual abuse. Eventually, after managing to elude authorities, Berg died. But the group continues to this day, its current membership claiming they've cleaned up their act.

"For me, one of the things that drives the film is the question: Why do people follow charismatic leaders without question?" says Neidik. "This group began innocently enough with celibacy, and then turned into a prostitution ring. How did this happen?"

Neidik secured amazing access to the Family for his documentary. He interviews current members (including the offspring of Berg himself), who defend the religious affiliation and still hold Berg up as a holy prophet (his picture now hangs beside Jesus Christ's in Family homes).

Neidik says the Family was reasonably open; the film crew went to their main headquarters in Britain and filmed for a few days, asking what they thought were innocuous questions (saving the tougher ones for last). Then the Family asked that they stop filming, saying they didn't like the questions that were being asked. Neidik managed to negotiate some more time with them.

Meanwhile, Neidik and his researchers were trying to get material that would substantiate the allegations of illegal behaviour the group was accused of. Former members handed over some utterly horrifying videos, including one of Berg's granddaughter, who, looking about eight years old, does a dance for the camera that is clearly intended as erotic (Berg was charged with sexually molesting the girl).

Despite the historical horror show, Neidik says it's now clear the group really has changed. 'I actually really liked many people in the Family. They're sort of more like the Osmonds now. But they really don't question anything. And that's frightening.'

Neidik's job became all the more tricky when he found that the group had indeed evolved: how to present all this sensational material and yet still convey the idea that the Family wasn't all bad? "It's important to remember these people are human. If you take away their humanism, you can do anything to them."

"This is ultimately a film about the difference between faith and blind faith."