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**FEATURE**

**Stress in the Family**

*To some, it is a useful training program; to others, a cult. Either way, NXIVM and founder Keith Raniere remain embroiled in controversy*

By Chet Hardin

It was 1991, and Toni Natalie was smoking again. She had thought that she had kicked the habit, but when her brother fell ill, she found herself spending all of her time at the hospital. "It was stressful," she says. "You know how it is." When his girlfriend offered her a cigarette, she took it.

But she wanted to quit. So when Keith Raniere, who claims to be in the 1989 *Guinness Book of World Records* for "highest IQ," offered to help her, she thought, "Great! The world's smartest man wants to help me quit smoking?" Raniere told her that they would need to go to a quiet place, where he could talk to her.

"So we go into his office, and I remember him asking me questions like, 'What makes you nervous?' and 'What relaxes you?' Talking to me; touching my knuckles, using that as trigger points [for hypnosis]. And I came out of the room, and my husband says to me, 'Geez, what were you doing in there all that time?' And I was like, 'What do you mean all that time?'" She felt as though she had been alone with Raniere for 15 minutes. Her husband informed her that, no, she had been gone for almost two hours and 45 minutes.

"I guess some people are more susceptible to this stuff than others," she says. "I was the prime candidate. And that was the beginning of the end."

Raniere had made the news a few years earlier, when, as a 27-year-old state worker, he was accepted into the Mega Society, an exclusive union of those who possess extraordinarily high IQs. (Think Mensa on steroids. At the time, there were only three members worldwide.) In a *Times Union* profile on Raniere, impressive claims were made: He graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute with three simultaneous degrees in math, physics and biology; he was able to spell "homogenized" by age 2, after seeing the word on a milk carton; and at age 4, he understood quantum physics. The article also stated that he had won the East Coast judo championship at 12 and had tied the state record for the 100-yard dash. Plus, he only needs two to four hours of sleep a night.

When Natalie met Raniere, he owned and operated Consumer's Buyline Inc., an outfit he had started a year earlier in Clifton Park. It was a discount buyers club—members were paid a commission for enrolling new members—and it brought in a lot of money. At its height, the company boasted 250,000 distributors nationwide and 173 local employees. One year, it reported sales topping \$30 million.

Natalie and her husband were in their early 30s, living in Rochester, and had been married for about four years. They had a small, adopted boy and a nice home. "We were in love," she says. "It wasn't like a *Gone With the Wind* kind of love. But we were happy. We were friends." They had just won the award for selling the most CBI memberships for the month, so they traveled to Clifton Park to pick up their prize and to see the company headquarters. Plus, she adds, they were curious about Raniere.

"When I went up to Clifton Park for the first time," Natalie recalls, "Pam Cafritz was running around in the background going, 'Is she Family? Is she Family? She looks like Family. Is she Family?'"

"And I remember Keith saying, 'Yes, she's Family.'"

Natalie had no idea what Cafritz, an associate of Raniere's, had meant; she just took it as the friendly enthusiasm of eccentric strangers.

"And Pam said, 'Is she *The One*?'" Natalie recalls.

"And Keith said, 'She could be.'"

Within a year, Natalie had left her husband and moved to Clifton Park to be with Raniere.

By the mid '90s, CBI had collapsed under the weight of 25 state and federal investigations. Attorneys general and others alleged that the company was an illegal pyramid. Raniere settled with New York state for around \$50,000, but denied that he had been running a Ponzi scheme.

With CBI in ruins, Raniere moved on to his next venture: Executive Success Programs. He established the "human potential training" business in 1998 after meeting former nurse and noted hypnotist-therapist Nancy Salzman. Salzman had been working as a family therapist for years, and she boasted a reputation as a skillful practitioner of "neuro-linguistic programming" and Ericksonian hypnotherapy. Milton Erickson, who created this specialized form of hypnosis, was an American psychiatrist whose work included the exploration of hypnosis-inducing handshakes and the use of shock to eliminate phobias. Erickson is also noted for his work in neuro-linguistic programming, the controversial study of body-language cues and language patterns.

Salzman became the public face and president of ESP and Raniere became her "mentor."

It was around this time that Raniere began to call himself "Vanguard," Natalie says. "He was trying to find the right terminology for himself. Vanguard—creator of a movement."

According to ESP's Web site, they have "created international coaching standards that allow for accurate, consistent measurement of human psychodynamic performance. All ESP programs maintain standards of excellence and impart a unique, patent-pending technology called Rational Inquiry™ that enhances human performance in virtually every field of human endeavor."

ESP, or NXIVM (nex-ee-um) as it is more commonly known, is a growing and outwardly successful organization. Its classes are offered in Albany, Saratoga Springs, New York City, Washington state, Alaska and Mexico. Its seminars have drawn high-powered followers and supporters, including former U.S. Surgeon Gen. Antonia Novello; Sheila Johnson of Black Entertainment Television; relatives of two former Mexican presidents; Clare and Sara Bronfman, the daughters of billionaire Seagram's heir Edgar Bronfman Sr.; and on and on.

A 2003 *Forbes* article, "Cult of Personality," reported that NXIVM earned \$4 million yearly at the time. In a July 2006 follow-up, the magazine alleged that Salzman now lives in Sara Bronfman's \$6 million Manhattan apartment, with unlimited access to the Bronfman jet. Former NXIVM insiders claim to have witnessed the gifting of a \$20-million "tribute" from the Bronfman daughters to Raniere at his 2004 weeklong birthday celebration, "Vanguard Week."

But along with its popularity and successes, NXIVM has drawn vocal opponents who allege that its training sessions are manipulative and destructive, exacting a cultlike devotion from students. And Raniere, they claim, is the classic example of a cult leader, who surrounds himself with fiercely devoted (and mostly female) followers.

"Keith has always had women in front of him," Natalie says. "That is what he does. He takes vulnerable women, and he very easily becomes everything they need or want."

NXIVM's goals, as stated on its Web site, are ambitious: "To help transform and, ultimately, be an expression of the noble civilization of humans." This includes the construction of training facilities or NXIVMs. One possible facility was proposed for southern Saratoga County. The two-story building would have been 67,000 square feet and would have included a physical-therapy center and day care, but residents resisted construction, and in 2003, the plan was nixed.

Undeterred, NXIVM and its members continue to grow their real-estate holdings and own at least 12 properties in the Capital Region. These include single-family homes, condominiums and commercial property, the organization's training facilities on New Karner Road in Latham, and Romano's Family Restaurant on Route 9.

"Keith's ultimate goal has always been," Natalie says, "to have his own commerce, his own language, his own people where he is the king. . . . What he is doing is creating his own world in Clifton Park. . . . These people believe he is God. He believes he's God."

There are two courses of study offered through NXIVM. One, called Ethos, is relatively casual. A participant can attend any number of training sessions, offered regularly



Please, call me Vanguard: Keith Raniere



Happier days: Keith Raniere with Toni Natalie



Ready for Raniere's birthday party: Toni Natalie and Nancy Salzman

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throughout the week. The classes last only a couple of hours, and focus on "emotional training." Susan Miller, CEO of Goid Orchards, attended nearly a dozen Ethos sessions. The program, she says, was good for her.

"It was a difficult time for me. My mom had passed away," she says. "I had good changes." But she resisted taking the other course of study offered: Intensives.

"They make a lot of pitches for it. And they charge a lot of money for that program. My gut kept telling me that [Intensives] were not the thing for me to take. I went to a sales pitch one time . . . and I never went back. It just didn't make any sense."

Intensive Training is offered in five-day and 16-day sessions. The courses can last up to 14 hours straight. Some former students, or Espians, have claimed that during these sessions, room temperatures are kept uncomfortably high, the food served either lacks the necessary protein to maintain strength or is served irregularly or not at all, and that a large number of coaches are present, creating an atmosphere of physical intimidation. The stress involved, they add, can be unbearable.

Kristin Marie Snyder was taking her second, 16-day Intensive in Alaska when she apparently suffered a complete psychological breakdown. Alaskan authorities suspect that Snyder, an seemingly successful young professional, drowned herself by canoeing out into the middle of Resurrection Bay and capsizing. She had been involved with NXIVM for four months.

Her suicide note, as reported in *Times Union* on Feb. 1, 2004, read: "I attended a course called Executive Success Programs . . . based out of Anchorage, AK, and Albany, NY. I was brainwashed and my emotional center of the brain was killed/turned off. I still have feeling in my external skin, but my internal organs are rotting. . . . I am sorry life, I didn't know I was already dead. May we persist into the future." Her parents claimed in the article that Snyder had become convinced that she had been responsible for the Columbia shuttle disaster.

"When I read her suicide letter," Natalie says, "I couldn't believe Keith was doing this to other people. I only thought he was doing this to me." As a result of therapy sessions with Raniere and Salzman, Natalie says that she became convinced that she had been responsible for the Nazi Holocaust.

One time, Natalie claims, a group of Espians cornered her in her office. A man in the group said to her, "Close your eyes. Close your eyes and hold out your hands." She did as she was told and held out her hands, in which he placed a knife.

"And I said, 'What's this?'"

Natalie says that the man replied: "You should know, because that's the knife you killed me with."

The pressure NXIVM places on its students to recruit others for Intensives is unremitting, says former Espian Maria (not her real name; she asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation). From a prominent Mexican family, she was 27 years old and studying for her master's degree in New York City when her brother recruited her.

"The first thing they tell you," Maria says, "is [that] if you want to become more involved with the organization, you have to bring two people for the next Intensive. So my brother brought my mother and myself."

In Intensives, she says, Espians are introduced to the "Matrix," NXIVM's ideology. And to learn the "Matrix," sections of material called "modules" are explored. "Every 'module' together completes the 'Matrix.' Everything links to each other," she says. "The 'Matrix' is very impermeable. It is a whole different way to see the world."

Each "module" touches on a basic element of the human condition, and has a name such as "Money," "Trust," or "The Fall."

To understand "The Fall," one must understand "suppressives." When a person is a destructive force in the world, Maria says, such as a serial killer, a terrorist, or a critic of NXIVM, when they exhibit "suppressive" traits, when they "destruct value," they are referred to as "suppressives." And just as Lucifer took a fall in *Paradise Lost* (an oft-referenced text in NXIVM circles), Espians are taught that "suppressives" are capable of taking "The Fall." Once they have, it is taught that they have developed an "anticonscience"—good feels bad to them and bad feels good.

It was in the teachings about "suppressives" and "The Fall" that Maria began to feel that NXIVM was warning: You cannot leave, you cannot criticize or question the organization.

NXIVM has a strict hierarchy with Raniere (aka "Vanguard") at the top. Directly beneath him is Salzman, who insists that students refer to her as "Prefect." Students are expected to bow to Vanguard and Prefect. Sashes are worn to determine an Espian's level.

"You start with a white sash when you are a student," Maria says. "Then you get a yellow sash when you coach. Then you get stripes. Then you get the orange sash. Nancy had a gold sash."

The higher in the hierarchy, the closer an Espian is to "integration," akin to being enlightened, perfect: Thoughts flow together flawlessly, Maria says, "like a plate without any cracks." Salzman is close to integration, she says, and Raniere is completely integrated.

He is treated, she says, "like a Buddha or a Christ."

After being taught the module's material, the students break up into groups. Espians from every rank sit together and discuss the lesson. "When you are in the group," Maria says, "you will be asked questions like: 'Is suicide good?' 'Is suicide bad?'"

A student might answer, "I think it is bad, because you are being a coward." To which a coach might reply: "I think suicide is not that bad. Because, if you are a bad person, if you are not 'constructing value,' if you are 'destructing value,' then you should not have a place in the world, and you should be happy to kill yourself." In this way, she says, a student's belief system is constantly undermined. Doubt is cast upon opinions, and beliefs are systematically torn down.

One technique NXIVM employs is called "Exploration of Meaning," or "EM."

Maria explains the process as she remembers it: A problem or "issue" is identified in the student. The coach, or a coach in training, questions the meaning of the "issue," leading the student along a seemingly logical path with predetermined questions to the root of that problem. And when a student can relate the problem's manifest to the problem's root, there is an "aha" moment. The student has had an "integration." And the more "integrated" you are, the more you are living according to NXIVM's "Matrix."

"It is mathematical technology," Maria says. "It is like a mathematical equation. And you end up at zero every time. And once you are in zero, they give you the answers." Even though the Espian feels each discovery is a product of their own soul searching, she adds, they are actually being programmed.

"It's fascinating. Can you imagine how brilliant this guy [Raniere] is?" she asks. "He really is a genius."

After training with NXIVM for six months, Maria suffered a psychotic episode that she attributed to extreme stress. She began hallucinating and had to be taken to the hospital.

"It was in the moment before . . . I went into my psychotic break," she says. "I felt that I had to decide between my boyfriend and my life, and Keith. And that's when I broke. It's the devotion to him; you have to give your life to him. I didn't want to lose my boyfriend, and I didn't want to lose my life—he [Raniere] wants to have the control of your life."

Maria spent the next two years in treatment, taking antipsychotic and antidepressant medications. She still gets nervous talking about NXIVM and says that former Espians like herself are afraid to speak out because they know how "suppressives" are treated.

One such "suppressive" is Rick Ross, a New Jersey-based cult-intervention specialist who has been involved in lawsuits with NXIVM for the past three years. The controversial anti-cult lecturer and "deprogrammer" first won the animosity of NXIVM by distributing the group's copyrighted material to mental-health experts for analysis and then posting their findings on his Web site, RickRoss.com. NXIVM sued him, seeking damages of nearly \$10 million, and asked the courts to force Ross to remove the critical material. So far, the courts have upheld Ross' right to publish the reports.

Lawsuits are nothing new for Ross. At one point, he says, he was being sued by three groups simultaneously: the Gentle Wind Project of Maine, Land Mark Education, and NXIVM.

"I'm used to slap suits," he says. "This is nothing new to me. . . . I regard it as part of my work. If you are not being sued or threatened on a regular basis in my line of work, it would give you pause to wonder if your work is meaningful."

However, he says, he did not suspect the lengths NXIVM seemingly will go to silence its critics.

Rifling through his bank statements from September and October 2004, Ross gets lost in the pile of papers: "Debits, debits, where are deposits?"

"Oh, there it is," he says to himself.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

He is frustrated.

"I don't do my own books."

Ross is on the phone with a reporter, attempting to confirm information in a document that he claims he has never seen. The reporter is holding a copy of the nine-page report, including a cover page and a page that warns of the document's strict confidentiality. It appears to have been prepared on Nov. 23, 2004, for the O'Hara Group & Associates LLC, an Albany-based consulting firm that allegedly was working for NXIVM at the time. The report appears to be the work of a New York-based industrial-espionage firm Interfor Inc. (The document was given to *Metroland* by a former NXIVM insider.)

The document bears the title "Status Report," under which Rick Ross' name is printed. It contains sections such as "Criminal Record" and "Communications." It appears to be the result of an effort by Interfor to collect personal and business information on Ross. And according to the NXIVM insider, Raniere ordered the gathering of information not only on Ross, but on Toni Natalie as well.

Interfor's president, Juval Aviv, worked for years as a counterterrorism consultant with the FBI. Before becoming a regular fixture on Fox News, Aviv claims that he was a member of the Israeli intelligence outfit Mossad. Aviv is the author of *The Complete Terrorism Survival Guide: How to Travel, Work and Live in Safety* and the fictional thriller *Max*. Steven Spielberg's *Munich* is based on a Mossad operation in which Aviv allegedly participated.

Ross finds his October 2004 bank statements.

"Give me a deposit," he says.

The section in the document titled Financial Information lists 14 transactions, debits and credits. The entry from Oct. 12, 2004, is read to Ross. It is correct.

"Well," he says, "they need to be arrested. They have penetrated into my checking account."

"Anything else?" he asks. Another deposit is confirmed, and a debit as well. The report, it appears, contains his private banking information.

"Mr. Aviv," Ross says, "had better get a good lawyer."

This is not the first time Ross has heard of Interfor or Juval Aviv. He says Interfor contacted him in November 2004 (apparently at the same time the firm was mining information on him) to retain his services.

Ross recounts his experience with Interfor: He was told that an old friend of Aviv's, a woman calling herself Susan L. Zuckerman, was seeking help in extracting her daughter, "Judy," from NXIVM, and they needed Ross' help. Interfor even cut him a check for \$2,500 in November 2004 from its corporate account, stating that it was a retainer payment from Zuckerman. He met with Aviv, his assistant Anna Moody, and the woman who presented herself as Zuckerman at Interfor's office. There, he says, they hatched a plan to get Ross on a cruise ship with "Judy Zuckerman" so that he could confront her and work to deprogram her.

"They wanted to know everything that I knew about NXIVM," he says. "They asked me question after question. What did I really think of Keith Raniere? Did I think he was a cult leader? What did I think of their process of Intensives and seminars? How many complaints have I received [about NXIVM]?"

According to a NXIVM insider, the plan to get Ross on a cruise ship was a sting; the concerned-mother scenario was invented. And the role of daughter "Judy" was going to be performed by one of Raniere's closest associates, Kristin Keeffe. Perhaps, the insider says, they thought they could convert Ross.

The plan fell apart after Ross made it clear to Interfor that he would not be alone with the "Judy," that someone would have to be in the room with them, he says. That's his policy. Shortly after that, he was told that Susan Zuckerman had changed her mind. He was given no further explanation.

"What their goal was, ultimately, in the deception, I don't know," Ross says. But the scenarios are chilling. What could they have had in mind in going to such lengths to get him alone on a cruise ship with a member of NXIVM's inner circle?

Dr. Carlos Rueda, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital in the Bronx, says that he, too, was contacted by someone, within the past few months, claiming to represent Interfor. They said they needed his advice: The daughter of a rich Mexican family had become involved in NXIVM, and she needed therapy.

"They sounded very credible," Rueda says. "They sounded very corporate."

After a couple of calls, he stopped hearing from them.

Rueda joined the chorus of NXIVM's critics after treating three former Espians who, he says, had "decompensated," or developed psychiatric illnesses.

Their ailments, he says, can be linked to NXIVM's training, which places tremendous psychological stress on its students.

"And this can be a devastating and long-term situation," he says. "Patients may continue to have episodes of psychosis or depression" far beyond the initial onset of the illness.

What disturbs Rueda most about NXIVM is its seeming lack of interest in the welfare of its students. He worries that the training seminars are just a way to make money, with no concern for the psychological damage they level. This, he says, can be seen in how the organization treats students who suffer breakdowns.

"They dump you as soon as they see that you are decompensating," he says. "They say that you are 'weak.'"

Representatives of NXIVM and Interfor did not agree to be interviewed in time for this story.

"And you ask, 'Why would a sane person put up with this?'" Toni Natalie says. "You are so controlled by these people, when you are involved with them, you don't associate with anybody other than the 'Family.' You don't talk to anyone other than the 'Family.' It is a complete disassociation from everyone—your family, your husband, even your children if they get in the way."

It was 1998, and after more than six years with Raniere, Toni Natalie wanted out. She was taking the first NXIVM course when she had her own "aha" moment, realizing, she says, just how manipulated she had been by Raniere and Salzman.

I realized I had been their Guinea pig," she says. "As I was taking the course, I was seeing myself in all of my sessions with Nancy. I had had hundreds and hundreds of [therapy] sessions with Nancy and Keith." They had used those sessions, she believes, to experiment on her.

"It was scary as hell," she says. "I can't tell you how frightening it was."

After almost a year of working to divest herself emotionally and psychologically from Raniere and the Family, the day came when she finally snapped. It was over, of all things, a simple domestic spat.

"Keith was home sleeping while I was working, which was normal," she says. "I mean, this bullshit that Keith never sleeps—Keith sleeps all day long. He sleeps *all day long*."

She had asked Raniere to dry some clothes that were in the wash, pointing out to him a specific shirt that should not be dried because it would shrink.

"I came home, and he had put the shirt in the dryer. I said to him, 'I asked you not to do this.' And he starts screaming at me, 'You're stupid! How dare you tell me I don't know what I heard. I have perfect retention. I have a 240 IQ.' And he is screaming in my face: 'Tell me that you are wrong! Say that you are wrong!'"

He can't stand being told that he is wrong, she says.

"And I wouldn't do it. He told me if I didn't say that I was wrong . . . he would go. And that was it. I was like, 'I'm done.' And that's when the torture from the girls started."

Raniere, she says, was far from done with her.

"Don't forget," she says sarcastically, "I am 'The One.' I was supposed to bear the child that was going to change the world."

Raniere has in the past denied this allegation, saying that it is "not rational." Natalie insists that it is true. He was convinced that she was to have his child, she says. He even had members of the Family convinced, she says, despite the fact that Raniere knew that she is unable to have children.

He wrote her letters, she says, that are by turns admonishing and pleading. Other members of the Family wrote her letters, as well, on Raniere's behalf. They were convinced that she absolutely had to return and have his child.

"If I didn't return to him and bear this child, horrible things were going to happen," she adds. "So I am responsible for Sept. 11."

Kristin Keeffe came to her house once, she says, with her a bouquet of flowers and a candy box with the image of a mother and baby on it. She was crying, saying, "'I had a vision that you changed your mind,'" Natalie says. "'And you are coming back to us. And you are going to have the baby. I am so happy that you changed your mind and you are going to have the baby.'"

Natalie took the flowers and candies to Lawrence LaBelle, a judge in Saratoga at the time. LaBelle remembers the situation vividly. Natalie, he says, had gotten herself caught up with a "very, very unusual group. . . . It's a cult, I think, a very, very bad cult."

He can't believe Natalie is talking to reporters. Why, he asks, would she want to dredge up that misery?

"They do everything they can to destroy your life, to keep you quiet," she says. "Especially me, because I know so much about them." Five years ago, Natalie was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, she says, because of what she was put through.

"I know what was done to me," she continues. "I know what was done to my family. I know what they are doing to other families. I know how they mind-fuck people. I know how dangerous they are. I know how dangerous Nancy Salzman is, and Keith Raniere. They are very, very dangerous, scary people."

It has taken her six years of therapy, she says, to be able to talk at length about her experiences with Raniere. She still lives in fear, and she says, rarely leaves the house alone.

"The scary part of the organization," Natalie says, "is that they have a philosophy, his philosophy . . . called 'right action' or 'wrong action.' And if he believes that something is 'right action' . . . it is OK to do whatever it takes. If you had to kill somebody, and it is for the betterment of the Family, it would be OK."

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