

Ten years after the Jonestown tragedy

By SARI HABER

What's wrong with us? Last Friday was the 10th anniversary of the Jonestown Massacre. Does it mean anything? What have we to show to the 917 men, women, and children murdered by the poisonous words of one man? What have we learned from this tragedy? According to Council on Mind Abuse (COMA) director Robert Tucker, we have learned nothing.

Tucker spoke last Thursday in Stedman Lecture Hall B after a Jewish Student Federation presentation of *Deceived* a documentary exploring the 1978 mass suicide at Jonestown, an isolated farming community in Guyana, a small country on the northern coast of South America.

The deception of Jonestown began with Reverend James Jones, founder and leader of The People's Temple. Jones at first appeared as a miracle to the people of Jonestown. Church-going took on a new meaning. Everyone cared for one another. Jones was apparently held in such high regard that "people began to accept his ideas more than their own." It was on this trust that Jones manipulated people's minds. He began enforcing rules — strict rules. One was required to work 16 hours a day, every day of the week, from 5 a.m. until 9 a.m., and even after that would have to attend a sermon by Jones. Spouses were not allowed to have sex or speak to one another. Jones did everything in his power to turn people against each other.

"Divide and conquer was one of his goals," the movie states.

Basically, every worked, ate and lived for Jones. The question the movie raises is: did Jones have his scheme planned from the beginning, or were his intentions pure and honourable?

Deceived uses effective video and tape recordings to emphasize Jones' power and the people's trust in him, with quotes such as "Your parents don't care for you . . . No one cares for you except the church."

Jones' "bogeyman" tactics were effective with children. He would instruct a cult members would be waiting to pull the child underwater. Jones would then "save" the child

from the terrifying experience so that the child would see him as a hero.

Jones also used electric shock to terrorize his victims.

In 1978, California congressman Leo Ryan went to Jonestown to conduct a two-day investigation in response to the complaints of cult members' relatives. Ryan's long-awaited investigation seemed to be the catalyst to the ticking bomb in Jones' mind. With Jones' permission, before leaving Ryan asked Jones if anyone wanted to return with him.

Of about 1,000 People's Temple members, 14 decided they wanted out. Jones became bitter, saying "They will try to destroy us . . . They always lie when they leave." Jones had Leo and three journalists killed by soldiers. The rest escaped but continued to be haunted by the fear of Jones.

The town's mass suicide was stated in the film as having rehearsed several times by the cult. From the December 4, 1978 issue of *Time*: "Jones would harangue them about the beauty of dying. All would line up and be given a drink described as poison. They would take it expecting to die. Then Jones would tell them the liquid was not poisonous; they had passed his 'loyalty test.'"

This may have been a rehearsal but right after the defectors left, Jones' mind began to churn. The very doctors and nurses whom Jones put through college helped concoct and administer the Kool-Aid-flavoured poison they were all forced to take. Others were shot to death by Jones' patrol guards.

Tucker led a lively discussion about Jonestown after the movie. He talked and fielded a series of questions about why and how the Jonestown massacre occurred.

Tucker was most concerned, however, about the ease that a tragedy of this sort could re-occur. Tucker stressed that the massacre was still misunderstood and that there is "still no effective way to investigate these groups. Extremist groups are developing all over. Something like Jonestown could happen tomorrow and we would know little how to handle it."

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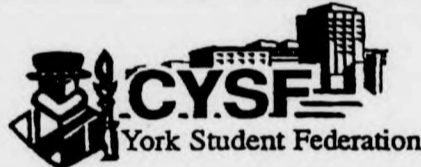
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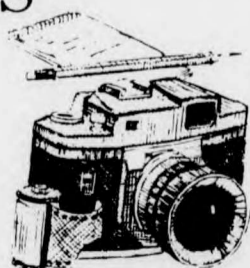
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