

COMMUNITY

Teachers learn how to spot cult influence

By KURT BEGALKA
The Northwest Herald

MARENGO.—Cults aren't always just looking for money. Sometimes they want your life.

The discovery of a mass grave April 13, just south of the Mexican border, drove home the seriousness of the problem. Police have linked the killings to a satanic cult of drug smugglers, who believed human sacrifice would make them invincible.

It didn't.
Margaret Bongiorno, clinical psychologist with AAP Mental Health Resources of Skokie, is working hard to prevent such tragedies from happening in Illinois. As part of a recent teacher training program at Marengo Community High

School, she instructed educators on how to recognize signs of satanic cults and ritualistic child abuse.

"It's a topic very few people want to talk about," Bongiorno said. Not only do some fear reprisals, but there is an absence of hard data.

However, as program director for Riveredge Hospital in Forest Park, she's seen or heard of plenty of cases in Illinois. In the course of her work at AAP, it became obvious some children were subjected to satanic rituals. In the past she had one or two children in 20 with such problems. Now it's about 50 percent of her adolescent clients.

Reasons range from intellectual curiosity, to peer pressure to family influences. She doubts promoting prayer in school would help. For those involved in satanic

rituals, Bongiorno said, it is a religion.

Indeed many of the satanic symbols are a twist on Christianity and its symbols. The cross may be pictured upside down or end in a question mark — "the cross of confusion" — Bongiorno said. Other easily identifiable symbols include: 666, FFF (the sixth letter of the alphabet) and swastikas.

Behavior also is affected. A child may be pre-occupied with death, dying or dismemberment. He or she may talk about seeing people in scary masks or costumes, and sing songs having to do with the devil.

Bongiorno said she began to study cults in depth about two years ago, so she could better understand how they function and therefore warn people how to avoid them. Better communication, par-

ticularly between parents and children, is a key to nipping the problem early, she said.

"Marengo is to be congratulated for trying to learn more about this topic," Bongiorno added.

Cynthia Kisser, executive director of the national Cult Awareness Network based in Chicago, said her organization's goal also is to get the word out.

"There are a lot of different types of cults," Kisser said. "Some are very invisible. Cults have modernized so much on how they market themselves."

Kisser said cults need not have religious connotations. They can be business-related, "using behavior-modification techniques disguised as a service or business."

Kisser estimates the national office

receives some 7,000 telephone calls and about 3,000 letters monthly from people with cult-related questions. And with a second phone line, Kisser estimated the number of phone calls could increase another 100 a day.

These people include counselors, therapists, government agencies, law enforcement officials and parents.

"People affected by it are taking it seriously," Kisser said. She said particular attention was focused on such groups last year, the 10th anniversary of the "Jonestown" mass suicide and murder in the South American jungle of Guyana.

For additional information about cults call (312) 267-7777 or write Cult Awareness Network at 2421 W. Pratt Blvd., Suite 1173, Chicago, Ill., 60645.