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HEADLINE: A MAINSTREAM MASK ON FRINGE CULTS;
GROUPS PUSH MESSAGE OF SUCCESS, HAPPINESS

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BODY:

An attractive professional asks a co-worker to attend a writing seminar after work. An ad in a student newspaper offers academic scholarships to help cover college expenses. A wealthy rancher promises to train teenage girls and turn them into world-class equestrians.

Behind each enticing offer was an alternative religious or social movement eager to proselytize to potential, though unsuspecting, recruits.

Twenty years ago, experts say, such groups were easily recognizable as cults or other groups that populate the cultural fringe. They were distinctive in how they evangelized as well as in their appearance.

But in the last decade, many such groups have become increasingly accomplished at portraying themselves as mainstream to gain the confidence of prospective recruits. Not only do they offer potential new members spiritual salvation, they also open the door to business opportunities.

Their tactics range from "love bombing," where potential recruits are lavished with praise and attention, to the sponsorship of something as commonplace as stress management seminars. The approach is not unlike come-ons for vacation condos or home improvement schemes: Hook the customers, then go to work on them.

The recent suicides of 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult in California once again has focused attention on the activities of these organizations, how they bring new members into their orbits and keep them there.

Although Heaven's Gate fit into the oddball category of cults, with the androgynous appearance of the cultists and their belief in a spaceship trailing Hale-Bopp Comet, many groups today do not look the part.

Though many may have shed their weird image and door-to-door proselytizing, these groups haven't altered the beliefs or organizational structures that can make them dangerous to members, experts say.

Paul Boyer, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison who has studied apocalyptic groups like Heaven's Gate, said cults need not be organized strictly around religious beliefs. But he said a group fits the description if it "grants a high degree of authority to its leader, excludes outside influences and exercises tight control over members' lives."

Contrary to popular belief, an apocalyptic "cult" such as Heaven's Gate doesn't typify common cult groups today, said Marcia Rudin, director of the American Family Foundation's international cult education program.

"Today's groups don't spout apocalyptic rhetoric to loonies and lost souls," she said. "They skillfully market themselves to a new mainstream clientele by offering financial success, happiness, social success and self-fulfillment."

Many are well-funded and well-organized, said Margaret Singer, emeritus adjunct professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley. Singer is author of "Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives."

"The most common means used is to find out a potential recruit's interests and appeal to those," Singer said. "For example, if I came up to you--say we both work in the same building--and discovered your interest was journalism, I might say there's a journalism seminar tomorrow night and would you like to attend? Because your interest has been piqued, you might let down your guard."

Singer recalls her work with a group of teen girls who were involved in a cult that revolved around horses. It began, she said, when a Southern California woman with a large ranch invited several girls to exercise her horses after school. She promised them that if they moved in with her and worked hard she would teach them to be world-class equestrians.

The woman didn't keep her promise, but instead worked the girls to exhaustion every day; in the evening she read to them from the Bible "to make them feel guilty and beholden to her," Singer said. The group eventually was forced to disband when the parents of the underage girls notified police.

"The woman lured the girls into trusting her by striking at where they were most vulnerable: their love for horses," Singer said.

Although they deny it, Rudin said, several of the larger religious groups use deceptive means to recruit at the high school and junior high level, often under the guise of providing stress management or AIDS prevention programs to students.

"The Unification Church, for example, contracted with the New York City public schools to teach an AIDS prevention program. When somebody blew the whistle on them, the contract was withdrawn," she said.

Singer says most cults have found some success through "love bombing" or seducing potential recruits with lavish compliments and attention.

If true, then Ken Kunz's recruiting experience was by the book.

As a 17-year-old freshman at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, Kunz attended a Bible study in his residence hall. "I was led to believe that I was going into a group of like-minded Christians interested in studying the Bible," recalled Kunz, now 28 and a part-time philosophy student at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

"Everyone in the group was so nice," he said. "They offered to study with me, to eat with me in the cafeteria. Suddenly I had this incredible circle of new friends."

This camaraderie lasted until Kunz inquired about other religious activities on campus, and that drew criticism from members of the group.

It also became apparent that his new friends didn't believe he was a Christian. "Their continued friendship was conditional on my 'becoming a Christian,' which meant being baptized into the group's church, the Champaign-Urbana Church of Christ."

The International Churches of Christ (ICC), the movement to which the Champaign church belongs, is among the fastest-growing new religious groups in the U.S. (The ICC is not associated with the mainstream Churches of Christ.) Kip McKean is the group's founder and self-appointed leader.

Though a relatively new group, established in 1979, the ICC is among the groups whose recruiting tactics have raised concern on the nation's campuses in recent years, said Ron Loomis, a former student administrator at Cornell University who tracks the campus activities of such groups for the cult education program.

Loomis has identified at least 22 universities, including Boston University, George Washington and Marquette, from which the ICC has been banned or denied campus registration for fraudulent representation or student harassment. Loomis says that many colleges, while leery of being perceived as persecuting religious groups, restrict those groups' actions by forcing them to register as student campus organizations.

Boston University chaplain Bob Thornburg's eight years of stormy relations with an ICC campus group culminated in 1987.

The group was expelled after student recruiters went "door-to-door in the students' residence hall announcing a mandatory orientation meeting that was neither mandatory nor school-sponsored," Thornburg recalled.

Loomis says several colleges recently have reported a scholarship scam the group appears to be using as a recruiting device. "It typically involves offering a modest scholarship through an organization called Helping Other People Everywhere (HOPE) as a mechanism for gathering address and telephone information about students and the manipulation of guilt and gratitude on the part of scholarship recipients."

ICC spokesman Al Baird scoffs at the notion that the group uses deception to recruit members. "We have 150,000 members worldwide. And when you're talking 150,000 people, I'm sure there will be mistakes. But we don't condone that."

Three months after attending his first Bible study, Kunz became what he believed was a true convert. For two years he passionately evangelized the church's teachings and tried, "as the best Christians do," he said, to recruit members.

But his grades had gone from A's to D's and F's and he had to drop out of school. A dispirited Kunz allowed his mother to persuade him to enter "exit counseling," a voluntary form of deprogramming. Shortly after, he left the group, spiritually lost, in debt and incapable of living independently.

Still, some caution against blaming the misfortunes of the Kunzes of the world on alternative or new religious groups, especially if it means limiting their freedom.

"Bad things happen to people in new religious movements. But bad things happen to atheists and people in old religious movements too," said Eugene Gallagher, professor of religious studies at Connecticut College in New London, Conn., and author of "Why Waco?" about the FBI-Branch Davidian standoff. "If your son or daughter is a victim of fraud or is being physically harmed in some way, there are laws against such things. But don't condemn the whole religion."

Well-funded and organized, many have shed their weird image and prey on potential recruits' interests and insecurities.