

'They'll take the Kool-Aid'

By STEVEN GIRARDI
Sun staff writer

The Fort Harrison Hotel in downtown Clearwater could be the scene of another Jonestown-type mass suicide when Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard dies, a former high-ranking church official said Wednesday.

Edward Walters, the first witness called during Clearwater's public hearings into Scientology practices, said under oath that many Scientologists are "addicted" to Hubbard the way members of the People's Temple were to their leader, the Rev. Jim Jones.

"If Hubbard decides to leave this planet he'll take the others with him—they will take the Kool-Aid," Walters said referring to the poisoned drink Jones and his followers swallowed in a November 1978 murder-suicide at Guyana.

Walters, 44, said he first realized this fear after seeing a television movie account of the Jonestown incident, in which 913 people died.

"I was astounded how Rev. Jones did the same things Hubbard did," he said. "The people are totally dedicated to him. They are addicted to him mentally and physically."

Scientologist attorney Paul Johnson of Tampa said later Wednesday he was disturbed and outraged by the statement.

"I cannot believe what I'm hearing," Johnson said. "To say people in Clearwater will take the Kool-Aid or be jumping out of windows or something, that's just blatant sensationalism."

"And if it's typical of what they're going to hear during these hearings, how is the church going to combat those type of wild, slanderous and irresponsible statements that will be disseminated throughout the whole country?"

Walters, who called The Fort Harrison, 215 S. Fort Harrison Ave., the sect's most prestigious headquarters, said he is worried about the devotion to Hubbard by Scientologists who have reached upper levels in the church's structure.

He called rank-and-file church members "nice, decent people. If they were not in Scientology, I believe many would be in the Peace Corps or something like that."

He said not all Scientology methods are bad and that as a church member "I believed it. I loved it."

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* Walters: 'They'll take the Kool-Aid'

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He said he had reached a status of Class Eight in the church's technical division, one of few to achieve a level that high. He was in charge of auditing, a form of church counseling that probes the past of church members.

He said he kept "confessional files" on church members, occasionally releasing the personal information to the sect's Guardian Office in some investigations.

But he said that after nine years in the organization he called "intriguing," he had become disillusioned with it.

He decided to quit when the church was accused of breaking into the U.S. Department of Justice and "they started lying to the Scientologists about the break-in," he said.

Walters said he and his wife were expelled

from the church in 1979, about the time he was talking about quitting and going to the FBI with information, which he eventually did.

Walters, a New York City native, said he spent five years, between ages 15 and 20, as a nationally-touring pool player.

"I was one of the best in the country," he said.

He wound up eventually in Las Vegas and went to work as a card dealer for a gambling casino "the day after I turned 21." He worked his way up to a boxman—supervising dice games—then to a boss and executive.

He gave up the job to join the church in 1970 but has since returned to the casino business.

He said he kept the couple's two children, Steve, 26, and Kim 22, away from the church.

"I was going to audit them myself," he said. "I did some with my daughter. Not all auditing is bad."