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Father sits in on hearings, hopes to 'cure' son of Scientology

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CLEARWATER — The way Leon Haigler tells it, Scientology is just about as contagious as the common cold.

In his family, it started with his daughter Karen, spread to his son Donald and then afflicted his youngest child David.

Haigler, a retired U.S. government geologist, came to Clearwater last week from his home in Fairfax, Va., to witness the Clearwater City Commission's public hearings on Scientology.

EACH DAY he came to City Hall with a large black briefcase out of which he took a tape recorder. He turns the machine on as the hearings begin. He turns it off when the hearings end.

The gray, bespectacled Haigler says he taped most of the hearings to play for his 26-year-old son when Donald visits home in June. Haigler hopes the tapes will convince Donald "to rejoin the human race."

So far, his son's return trip to normality has looped-the-loop, Haigler says; it's hard to take a straight line back once you've been a Scien-

**Witness says
Scientologists
harassed her
after she left
organization:
Story, Page 1-B**

tologist.

Haigler says he first heard about Scientology when Karen, now 30, joined the church around 1976. "She thought it was wonderful," he recalls.

HAIGLER WASN'T so sure, but he had survived a stint in the Navy during World War II and thought he could survive this. He says he had no idea how his daughter's Scientology membership would affect the entire family,

causing the parents to argue against the children and the children to try to recruit the parents.

Haigler is convinced that nothing predisposed Karen to cults. She was just one of those youths with "a strong urge to want to do good, to want to help others."

He admits Karen was a little naive — "You have to be more streetwise to their (the Scientologists') scams," Haigler says — but states unequivocally that "anyone is vulnerable."

A Scientology-sponsored communications course sealed Karen's fate. "She was gone. The Scientologists, they prey on that," Haigler says.

KAREN IS STILL a Scientologist, Haigler says, but with two young children, she has little time for the church. Her ex-Scientologist husband is helping to end her affiliation with the group, he says.

It was Karen who recruited Donald to the church, and his eventual "conversion" that brought Haigler and his wife Kathleen to Clearwater a year ago this May.

See SCIENTOLOGY, Page 3

Scientology

from Page 1

Haigler says he and his wife wanted to educate Donald about "the underside of Scientology." They also wanted to tell Donald his grandfather was dying.

The couple was accompanied by Nan McLean, a former Canadian Scientologist who defected from the church years ago and has been described by church officials as a "professional anti-Scientologist" and "deprogrammer." She is attending the City Commission's public hearings.

WHEN SEEING their son proved to be more difficult than they bargained for, the Haiglers enlisted support from former Clearwater City Commissioner Richard Tenney and his business partner Alex Cornell. Both were virulent anti-Scientologists.

The group planned a press conference on the steps of City Hall.

With help from church officials, Donald staged his own press conference and explained why he was happy with the organization. He said Scientology had rid him of a drug problem, and he described his contract with the church as "a vow to help mankind."

He also said he was aware of allegations against Scientology, including the criminal convictions of some top church officials in

Washington, but stated that the criminal acts violated church policy and he did not condone them.

FINALLY, HE SAID he loved his parents and wanted to stay in touch with them, but he feared Mrs. McLean and suspected she might kidnap him.

When it was the Haiglers turn to talk to the media, Donald was in the audience. There was a tearful reunion, and the parents got to talk at some length with their son. But Donald refused to forsake Scientology for his family, and the Haiglers returned to Fairfax without him.

Haigler says the church rewarded Donald by transporting him to Los Angeles and promoting him from his position as a church cook.

Donald came home last Christmas, and because he showed an interest in football and plumbing, Haigler thought he seemed almost normal. The young man has since returned to California, but his parents expect him back in June.

Dave, 23, has recently left the church and gone into the Army.

Haigler says Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard is "an extremely stupid man" who deals "more with science fiction than with science." He has similar ways of describing Scientology.

Haigler thinks the hearings are important because they demonstrate this: "If someone is presenting something too good to be true, it is (too good to be true)."