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In Ranieri's shadows

Women recall manipulation, underage encounters

By JAMES M. ODATO and JENNIFER GISH Updated 12:33 pm, Wednesday, February 22, 2012



IMAGE 10 OF 18

Pamela Cafritz, center, allegedly hired the 12-year-old daughter of a Consumers' Buyline worker in 1990 to walk her dog, after which Keith Ranieri, the girl now says, drew her into a sexual relationship. Police declined to pursue the case years later. With Cafritz here are Sara, left, and Clare, right, Bronfman, financial backers of NXIVM and Ranieri, leaving the Dalai Lama's 2009 visit to Albany, which the Bronfmans arranged. (Patrick Dodson / Special to the Times Union)

Women who have had sex with Keith Ranieri say it was billed as a spiritual experience, a transfer of his godlike energy.

One said Ranieri told her their union would make her see a blue light.

Another recalled him explaining a threesome would cure the pain of childhood molestation — that she could then start to view sex as just sex.

And in 1984, when a woman objected to 24-year-old Ranieri having sex with her underage sister, the woman said Ranieri explained her sister's soul was much older than her biological age. The girl was 15 or 16 at the time. But according to the man who came to view himself as an enlightened being, she was a Buddhist goddess meant to be with him.



More recently, members of his inner circle of women, some of whom work on behalf of NXIVM and serve him sexually, told a woman that doing business with Ranieri means sleeping with him, too.

Ranieri, the 51-year-old founder of NXIVM, a business built on self-improvement, claims to have **one of the world's highest IQs**. He holds **three degrees** from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. His round face is framed with salt-and-pepper beard. At about 5-foot-7, he no longer possesses the body of the dedicated weightlifter he once was, and he has an affection for baggy shirts and sweatpants.

Yet former follower Susan Dones described during a November 2010 deposition in her bankruptcy case how Ranieri pursues many women and how those closest to him insist no one **owns his body**.

Today, two women who had sex with him when they were just girls, the sister of a third underage partner of Ranieri's, and some of Ranieri's former adult lovers have come forward to tell their stories.

They've said he is more than just a man with an endless sexual appetite.

They've said he needs to be stopped.

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One woman, whose name is being withheld for this story, was just a girl in 1990, a 12-year-old with feathered bangs and long blond hair who was trying to adjust to a new life following her parents' divorce and a move from the country to Clifton Park. Her mother was a saleswoman for Raniere's members-only buying club, Consumers' Buyline Inc., and was trying to raise two daughters.



She recalled her mother saying Raniere was "an Einstein." Consumers' Buyline, which Raniere ran through the first half of the 1990s after he left a job as a computer programmer for the state Division of Parole, was the kind of place where managers kept late hours and the culture was informal. Raniere would call staff meetings to deliver sometimes tearful, emotional messages. He frequently showed a film about a man who

plants seeds in the desert to build a forest. He suggested he was that type of noble cultivator of people.

The girl was a seedling, a kid who thought of boys as schoolyard playmates. She hadn't even started a seventh-grader's crush on New Kids on the Block.

When Raniere offered free tutoring, the girl's mother jumped at the opportunity. At the same time, that girl has recalled today, one of Raniere's longtime girlfriends, Pamela Cafritz, hired her to walk a dog twice a day.

Cafritz encouraged the girl's visits to the townhouse she and Raniere shared with other women. And Raniere showered the girl with attention. She said he urged her to talk about her life. He gave her a necklace — a heart with a stone in it.

The girl had braces and bright eyes, liked to climb trees and play with Matchbox cars. Raniere was almost 30 and dressed in business suits. He was spearheading a company that boasted of selling at least 250,000 memberships nationwide.



He was supposed to teach her Latin and algebra. Instead, she said, he told her she hugged like a child, her arms wrapped around him but her hips pushed away.

He taught her to hug the way adults do, pelvis-to-pelvis.

He took her virginity.

The girl liked being able to hang out with Raniere and the women around him. She thought sex was just part of fitting in.

"They told me I was smart and took an interest in me; they let me spend every afternoon at their house," she said. "It was exciting to be somewhere where people wanted me. I was perfect picking — insecure at the time... To have someone that mature and that well thought of to be interested in me, it was flattering. I was young, inexperienced, overwhelmed, out of my league."

Even though the girl was several years shy of the legal age for sexual consent in New York, which is 17, Raniere continued to have sex with her not only in his townhouse but in empty offices, in an elevator and in a broom closet at the plaza that housed Consumers' Buyline, she said.

But after several months and about 60 sexual encounters with Raniere, she said, her emotions had changed. She started skipping school and running away from home. He lived nearby, and as her uncertainty about the relationship grew, she didn't feel safe at home.



It wasn't until 1993, about two years after their relationship ended, that the woman **reported the sex with Raniere to police.**

Her mother confirms the story and backs up her recollections of how she was introduced to Raniere. The alleged underaged victim, now a mother herself raising children with her husband in the Capital Region, did not have an unusual response to childhood abuse, said **Maureen McLeod**, a Sage Colleges mental health professor who teaches criminal justice, since every victim has a different way of handling trauma. Sometimes, when they share pieces of their story with friends, family or co-workers, they're accused of lying, and they shut down.

A school district **document from the time shows the woman had received counseling for victims of sex abuse before deciding to file a State Police report**, which she's also kept. It's the only record of the report, since State Police officials said complaint documents from the 1990s have been purged.

The matter may have never been forwarded to prosecutors because the girl refused to wear a wire and confront Raniere to capture incriminating statements, and the report came years after the alleged incidents, offering no opportunity to collect forensic evidence. Thomas Constantine, who was State Police superintendent at the time, has no recollection of the case and said it likely was never shared with prosecutors.

More Information

The girl didn't want to see Raniere again and didn't think he would fall for a police plan to have her wear a wire, a request legal experts said would rarely be made of an underage victim today, but

This series

"Secrets of NXIVM: The untold story of Keith Raniere," is the result of a more-than-year-long examination of the self-improvement guru and conceptual founder of NXIVM, which has attracted students from Vancouver to Mexico but remains rooted in the Capital Region.

The reporting includes scores of interviews and a review of business records, police reports and thousands of pages of court documents, which provide a window into Raniere's world, but it comes without an interview with the elusive Raniere, who did not respond to repeated attempts to get comment. It also lacks any response from the women who surround him and serve as NXIVM's lifeblood. They, and the lawyers who represent the organization, have refused repeated requests to speak with them.

The four-part series — which details the grasp of mind, money and body Raniere has held over some followers — unfolds in print, online and with a special report for the iPad.

- **Part 1: An overview of Raniere and his unusual life.**

- **Part 2: Relentless litigation wrought against NXIVM defectors.**

- **Part 3: Raniere's multilevel-marketing mind.**

- **Part 4: A history of Raniere's sexual conquests.**

which was more common at a time when minors were considered shaky witnesses. She finally signed a waiver saying the claim Raniere had sex with her was true but that she was not pursuing charges. Her mother kept a carbon copy.

After her initial complaint to police, the woman spent 20 years working to feel comfortable in relationships.

"He took my innocence," she said. "I can never get that back."

The statute of limitations has long expired on the woman's case, but she said she has dreamed she may one day be part of a civil suit against Raniere if other women come forward with similar stories.

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In 1984, when Raniere was living in apartments in Troy, he met Gina Melita, a 15-year-old from Cohoes who performed with him in an RPI theater group that included members of the community

Melita was a precocious girl with an independent streak and a longing to find meaning. Before she met Raniere, she had explored being a born-again Christian. She kept journals and wrote poetry and thought school was holding her back from discovering what life was about.

She and Raniere, then 24, went to arcades together, where he liked to play Pac-Man and a game called Vanguard, in which destroying enemies increases the fuel in the player's tank. He described himself as a genius and judo champion. She thought it was cool to be with an older, smart guy who might help her graduate from high school early. He took her virginity in a dark room, her T-shirt left flecked with blood. She told him it was painful, yet a short time later, he wanted more. During their four-month relationship, he hounded the 135-pound girl to lose weight and urged her to keep their relationship secret from her mother.

After a while, she said she told Raniere she wanted to break off the relationship but he told her she should keep having sex. Even as a 15-year-old, she said, she realized Raniere didn't care about her.

Today, she is a 42-year-old chef in Georgia, resolved to expose the truth and still sorting through the sense of insecurity she said he planted.

Before Melita left Raniere's life, though, she had introduced him to a 15-year old friend from Cohoes High School named Gina Hutchinson, another girl from a broken family in the working-class town.

Hutchinson isn't here to tell her story. She died in 2002, when she was 33. She went to a Buddhist monastery in Woodstock and for reasons that remain unknown, **shot herself in the head.**

Her sister, Heidi Hutchinson, is left to speak for her.

It was the Christmas season of 1984 and around the time of Gina's 16th birthday when Heidi discovered Gina was having sex with Raniere. Heidi was home from college and Raniere crawled through the window of her sister's bedroom.

After Gina, who was raised as a Mormon, revealed the details of their relationship, Heidi confronted Raniere. Heidi said Raniere told her she did not understand her sister's soul was much older than her biological age. He explained Gina was a Buddhist goddess meant to be with him.

Raniere convinced Gina to drop out of school and be tutored by him, her sister recalled. The Hutchinson family assumed they would marry.

Gina, a good listener who would introduce herself to strangers at bus stops and who had a burning curiosity about spiritual things, worked at Consumers' Buyline, continuing at least a friendship with Raniere for many years. Heidi doesn't know exactly how long her sister's sexual relationship with Raniere lasted.

Gina studied religion and anthropology at the University at Albany and found mentors among her male professors, which her sister said Raniere didn't like. And in those times Gina tried to break away, Heidi said, one of the women in Raniere's inner circle would call repeatedly, urging her to return.

When Gina killed herself, she was found with a **Buddha medal in her pocket.** Only a few days earlier, she had sent a friend a **card that said "Never stop believing."**

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Experts in cults say they believe NXIVM behaves like a cult, and that cult leaders often use sex to control followers. Outspoken among experts willing to share their opinions on NXIVM is **Rick Ross**, a cult tracker who has examined and spoken about NXIVM so extensively it spawned a

lawsuit from Raniere for publicizing portions of NXIVM's training program. Cult leaders "have sex with their followers and it has as much to do with power and control as it has to do with sex," Ross said.

In the final years of the Branch Davidian sect in Waco, Texas, Ross said, David Koresh used sex to control the compound.

"He specifically broke up the group so that women who were married had to submit to him and their husbands did not have sex with them," said Ross, who had federal officials consult with him on the Branch Davidian sect. "The only people who had sex in the Davidian sect were David Koresh and the women. ... He demanded they be rail thin, that they go on a diet to be as thin as he wanted them to be. ... This points to the issue of power and control that the cult leader would have over the group."

Raniere, according to former followers, likes the women who surround him to keep their hair long. He has stressed the importance of a vegetarian diet and has subtly suggested if they don't eat well and exercise, it drains his own health. He has convinced them thinness is essential.

Cult leaders often tell followers they are special in order to seize control of them, says [Peter Olsson](#), a New Hampshire psychoanalyst and author of "Malignant Pied Pipers of Our Time: A Psychological Study of Destructive Cult Leaders From the Rev. Jim Jones to Osama bin Laden."

Olsson won't speak specifically about NXIVM, but he describes the general characteristics of leaders with narcissistic personality disorders, such as Jones and Koresh, men who craved sexual adoration from attractive, blossoming girls. Those characteristics include grandiosity, fantasies of power, belief in their own status, insistence on excessive admiration, a sense of entitlement, interpersonal exploitation and lack of true empathy.

In that context, the relationship of Raniere to many women around him that is described by the women who were once close to him is revealing.

Raniere has instructed his inner circle of women that to be "evolved" or "empowered" is to let go of conventional ideas and attachments in relationships. Sex, the women closest to him have been told and later explained in court testimony, is no different than playing the [violin](#) or [tennis](#).

And when women try to break away, the inner circle sometimes tries to lure them back.

Svetlana Kotlin, who once ran a physical therapy business beside NXIVM headquarters, ended her intimate relationship with Raniere after deciding she didn't want to be one of many women in his life. In an October 2009 deposition filed in federal court, Barbara Bouchey, a former NXIVM associate and one of Raniere's ex-girlfriends, explained how the [circle of women closed in on Kotlin](#).

"[They] started to come in to mentor [Kotlin] and tell her that it was her destiny, that Keith couldn't start a business with her unless she was in an intimate relationship with him, and that this was her issue and an attachment, and she needed to work [on] this, and if she were to leave that she might kill him because he was now intimately connected with her."

The women in Raniere's life are often smart, attractive, well-spoken and hold college degrees. But many arrive at Raniere's feet with emotional baggage, including bad relationships or troubled childhoods.

"The process of involvement and control is gradual," Ross said. "There's a spoon-feeding process, constant emphasis on the special nature of the leader, the aura of power and intellect of the leader. ... It's not unusual for women or men to fall in love with their therapist. With cult leaders, there are no boundaries. ... You see the leader in godlike terms, and it's difficult to refuse anything that the leader wants."

"As I see it, people are essentially broken down, made very pliable, very malleable, it makes them an easy target for someone like Raniere," Ross said. If Raniere had approached a woman cold, Ross said, "gone up to her in the supermarket and said, 'I'm a great intellect. I want you to give me your money and have sex with me' ... She would slap him. This is a process."

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Christine Marie, a blond beauty who wore the Mrs. Michigan sash in 1995, was running a children's educational material business and was a divorced mother of four when she hopped a train from Michigan to Albany with her 10-year-old daughter to meet Raniere. That was in 1998.

She had converted from Methodism to Mormonism in high school. But even though she married a Mormon and went to Brigham Young University for her psychology degree, she never felt like the faith was the right fit.

By the time she was on her way to meet Raniere, the Mormon church had excommunicated her for dating after her divorce.

Raniere wore aviator glasses she thought were out of style, jeans and a T-shirt. She didn't find him attractive at first. But he was charismatic and smart, and the circle of women around him confirmed what he had been telling her: He was a highly evolved human being.

She found him gentle and wise, recalling him as a "calm master who never gets ruffled."

She said Raniere praised her for homeschooling such an advanced child and told her she was a gifted educator. Marie remembers him assuring her she would play a profound role in this world.

She was hired to write marketing materials for National Health Network, Raniere's follow-up project to Consumers' Buyline, and later for Executive Success Programs, which would ultimately become NXIVM.

"Keith made me feel precious to him. He touched me gently on the side of the face and told me that I was such an innocent, pure soul that I didn't even belong on this planet," she said. "Keith explained that it might help me if I would be physical with him."

He explained how there was a profound event that would often happen to the women who became intimate with him, sometimes they would even see a blue light. ... Ultimately I agreed to be intimate with Keith, and it was just as he said. I even saw a blue light, but I don't think I told him so. I remember thinking, "Wow, my brain is really susceptible to the power of suggestion."

After she slept with Raniere, she said, he "sat me down and told me I was now part of his inner circle and committed for life and I could never be physically involved with another man."

She said Raniere had suggested they become intimate the first time they'd met. He explained she didn't have to be in a relationship to have sex, that skin was just skin. Another woman recalled him saying it, too, philosophizing that touching a man's penis was no different than stroking his forearm.

When she asked Raniere if he was involved with other women, Christine Marie remembers being surprised when he said he was. Then she saw the many of the women in Raniere's inner circle — which at least one former follower has referred to as a "harem" — shared his townhouse.

"I found it fascinating that these beautiful, smart women knew about each other and didn't seem upset to share Keith. I thought they were all extraordinary women," Christine Marie said. "Still, it seemed like secret polygamy to me, and I remember feeling sorry for them, too. As I understood it, they had to share the man they loved, they couldn't publicly celebrate their love with a wedding, they couldn't be with any other man, and they had to sacrifice a normal family life for what they believed was a higher cause."

On her second visit to Raniere's office, she said he spoke of higher causes.

"I remember him looking me in the eyes and touching me on the cheek and saying one day we'll have a child together, and the child would be an avatar and the child would help change the world," she said. "It's a very hypnotic thing."

She recalled Raniere telling her she'd have a profound dream, and in it she'd see the face of the man who was destined for her.

She had the dream, but the man wasn't Raniere.

In 2000, she moved to Utah, planning to rededicate herself to Mormonism. She said she soon met the man whose face she saw in her dream. He was a Utah cult leader who forced her to pass tests of faith to prove she was celestial, including funding his humanitarian organization aimed at eliminating poverty.

When she felt she had to break away from the man, she called Raniere for help. He flew her to Albany, where she was housed by a NXIVM member and where Raniere explained how the Utah cult leader "was actually a suppressive parasite who was taking advantage of me, who was attracted to my light and wanted to destroy me while benefiting from my life work. Keith wanted me to understand that I was being exploited by a cult leader who was nothing more than a con artist. He made a lot of sense."

She went back to the Utah prophet once more before breaking away for good. Raniere urged her to move to Albany, she said, where they would help her establish a business, and she would be protected in a circle of "ethical people."

"I was leery of going from one male guru directly to another. Furthermore, I knew I was psychologically vulnerable. I was diagnosed with PTSD, and I was worried about my children. I could not leave them in such an unstable situation during that critical time. [Raniere's business partner] Nancy Salzman could not fathom why I would make my family my priority when I was so desperately in need of their thought-reform program. I felt an intense amount of pressure to go. But in the end, I did not go. I did not join NXIVM, and I did not become part of Keith Raniere's inner circle."

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Toni Natalie was in a good marriage and was raising a young son when Raniere invited her to the Clifton Park headquarters of Consumers' Buyline because she had become a top seller and had built a large network in the Rochester area.

The first time Natalie visited, she heard Raniere's inner circle of women asking, "Is she family? Is she family? Is it her? Is it her? Is she the one?"

Natalie thought it was strange. But they seemed like rich college kids to her. She figured that's just the way bright young people acted.

She was a classic beauty, with long dark hair, a supermodel's cheekbones and full, wide lips. She was also a high school dropout, who was drawn in by Raniere's offer to have her head up a new skin care line he was launching called Awaken.

He made Natalie feel smart. He made her feel important.

"He's an amazing listener. He listens, and he watches, and he fills that hole," Natalie said. "He becomes everything you want and need and more. He fills every void."

She said Raniere asked her a lot of questions about her relationship, and eventually convinced her that her then-husband was sleeping with their

nanny, something she knows now was absurd. She said he told her she should move and he would help with her relocation.

She had viewed him as someone who could help her. She remembered how he counseled her through childhood molestation issues by making her repeat the memories to him in detail. And he once tried to convince Natalie that a threesome would heal her from those memories that haunted her, she said. It would at last, she remembered him telling her, allow her to view sex as just sex.

Another time, when her conservative Catholic upbringing made her reluctant to engage in oral sex, she was invited to attend a class Raniere created on the subject. She said he told the students, including Natalie, that mothers in some developing nations perform oral sex on their children to soothe them. She suspects the class was organized just for her.

Raniere encouraged Natalie to do hundreds of EMs — "exploration of meaning" sessions — with Salzman, who describes herself as a psychotherapist, and who is a practitioner of neurolinguistic programming. It's a technique that identifies how people have been "programmed" to think and act, and analyzes their words and body language in order to help them shed those beliefs.

Natalie would sometimes be in a meditative state for hours in the sessions, and Salzman would report the personal details of the sessions to Raniere. Sometimes they would speak about it in front of Natalie as if she wasn't in the room.

It took Natalie almost nine years to realize she could never have a normal life with Raniere, that he never would be a dedicated partner who could help raise her son.

But the breakup with Raniere wasn't a typical one.

He sent her a six-page typed **love letter** that was as condemning as it was heartsick. Although it opened with softness, requesting that while she read the letter she hold the enclosed white rose and play the soundtrack he'd recorded for her, paragraphs later he also warned she might end up in jail.

"I told you that you could have absolutely everything you wanted once you grew. I pledged — at all costs — to help you do this: overcome your neediness and open your heart through growth. I did not tell you exactly what growth was because it was something that had to come from you. Now I will explain. Growth was simply 3 things: 1. You had to open your heart and give as much as you took. You would then never be dependent on others or need others to do things for you (be 'do fors') to make you feel good. 2. You had to apologize sincerely for what you had done. 3. You needed to learn to trust yourself so you could trust me completely.

"I gave you the name 'Tookie' so that you might realize the first thing and waited patiently over the years for the day when you would say, 'Oh Keith, I am truly sorry about what I did, I was wrong.'"

Later in the note, Raniere accuses Natalie of hiding "business and money," allegations she denied and has never been charged with, and writes, "I later discovered this path leads to not very nice things for you and it appears my Sweetheart may well go to jail. I pray this does not happen but I don't think my Sweetheart has anyone to help her where she is."

She still has a **timeline of her demise** that Raniere sent, warning her that she was making a huge karmic mistake. She recalled the women in his inner circle showing up at her doorstep, insisting she must come back to Raniere because she was killing him and destroying everything for everyone by walking away.

She fled to Florida in an RV for six months, thinking it would end and she could start over when she returned.

Instead, NXIVM held up her bankruptcy in court with motions and filings for nearly eight years and recently subpoenaed her as it pursued a mostly unsuccessful breach of confidentiality case against former NXIVM trainers Susan Dones and Kim Woolhouse.

In August, Natalie claimed Raniere sexually attacked her before she left him in 1999, according to a court filing. NXIVM's lawyers called the Natalie claims "**scandalous, immaterial, and impertinent.**"

Natalie's allegation came up after Dones and Woolhouse said they broke away from NXIVM after they found out Raniere was sleeping with members of the NXIVM executive board and considered his behavior a conflict of interest.

Natalie wrote to the federal judge that she "**was raped repeatedly by Raniere, each time with him telling me it was harder on him than it was on me, that we needed to be together so that I could share in his energy, and that I needed to remain silent so as to not wake up my child who was sleeping in a nearby room.**"

Natalie and the other women speaking out said sex with Raniere wasn't a spiritual experience. It was something much darker, a way to melt them down and cast them into a mold he created.

Raniere's NXIVM continues to thrive from its Capital Region headquarters, drawing new believers from across North America. They'll pay thousands for a shot at personal growth, but some of those who have bought in with mind, money and body say the cost could be even greater.

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