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Fear and tears after Nxivm class

 Sunday August 6, 2006  [NXIVM](#)



Woman claims stressful, probing conditions used at leadership seminar in Colonie

Math teacher Nellie Forst wanted to control her temper better so she could one day become a principal. So at the advice of her father, the 28-year-old Philadelphia resident drove to [Nxivm](#) in Colonie for a five-day seminar expecting enlightenment and career advice.

But by the first evening, Forst says she ran out of the personal development company's New Karner Road office and left the Capital Region in tears. She says the

ABOUT RELIGION NEWS BLOG

Religion News Blog (RNB) provides busy religion professionals, academics, cult experts, reporters and others with a timely selection of hand-picked religion news items -- with a

course, held June 10, consisted of 14-hour classes, probing personal questions and elements of "sensory deprivation," which caused her such distress that she demanded back her father's \$2,430 class fee.

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has a master's degree from Drexel University.

Forst revealed her story as Nxivm continues to expand its real estate holdings across the Capital Region.

Nxivm, also known as Executive Success Program (ESP), now has at least 12 properties in Colonie, Halfmoon and Clifton Park, including commercial land, single-family homes, town houses and condominiums, according to property transfer records.

Nxivm educational speaker Barbara Bouchey bought Romano's Family Restaurant on Route 9 in Halfmoon for \$650,000 in June, according to RE/MAX broker Garry DeGonza. The next day, she filed architectural designs with the town to turn the 4,056-square-foot restaurant into four large offices, a public office space, a reception area, a cafe and bathrooms, according to the plans. Bouchey did not return a call for comment.

This spring, Nxivm's president, Nancy Salzman, purchased the company's longtime Colonie office at 455 New Karner Road for \$510,000. The company also paid \$1.2 million for three surrounding addresses, property records indicate.

But as Nxivm expands its boundaries, new allegations are surfacing from its opponents.

Lawyers for [Rick Ross](#), a New Jersey man being sued by Nxivm, say the company hired a private investigation firm that illegally dug up information on

particular focus on issues dealing with groups and movements often referred to as 'cults,' 'sects,' or 'abusive hes.' [\[Details\]](#)

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Ross. The attorneys say Interfor, the Manhattan-based firm that Nxivm hired, used bribes to obtain bank and phone records, and other personal information.

The lawyers recently served subpoenas to Interfor's president, Juval Aviv, and its executive, Anna Moody, according to Ross.

In addition, Toni Natalie, the ex-girlfriend of Nxivm founder Keith Raniere, has charged that Nxivm hired Interfor to investigate her for a report.

Interfor, which boasts employees from the British Secret Service and Israeli intelligence, did not respond to calls for comment. Raniere and Salzman have not responded to inquiries from the Times Union since 2003. While the company's previous attorney publicly defended Nxivm last year, its newest law firm, Proskauer Rose of Manhattan, did not respond to calls seeking comment.

Raniere, 45, founded Nxivm in 1998 — four years after Consumer Byline, his multimillion-dollar discount buying club in Halfmoon, collapsed under allegations it was a pyramid scheme. Raniere paid the state almost \$50,000 in settlement fees in 2004.

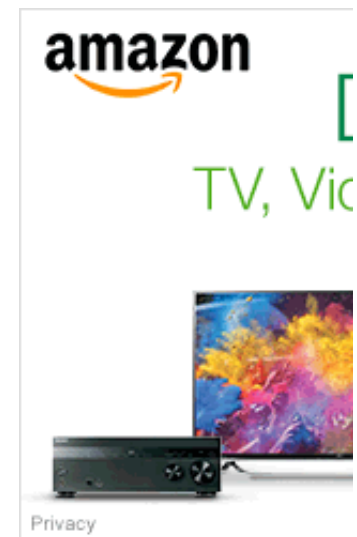
His company (pronounced Nex-ee-um) says it trains executives to reverse childhood stigmas and remove negative influences from their lives through a series of self-examinations called Rational Inquiry, created by Raniere.

Ed Forst, 52, the CEO of Lincoln Investment, says he's taken two 16-day Nxivm courses, and the teachings helped him overcome a painful divorce from his wife of 27 years.

Either the seminar wasn't for his daughter, Nellie, or

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she didn't stay long enough to appreciate it, Ed Forst said.

Father and daughter now correspond only by e-mail.

"I think that if you have an experience of any significance, you want to share that with a loved one. You want a common language," Ed Forst said. "It's a scary thing to look at yourself. Intimidating. If the other person doesn't want to be there, it could cause a breakdown in the relationship."

Though clients are made to sign a confidentiality agreement promising not to discuss what they are taught at Nxivm, Nellie Forst spoke publicly about her experiences, saying she views the course as dangerous and wants her father to separate himself from Nxivm.

After arriving at Nxivm offices early on a Saturday, Nellie Forst discovered each day's class lasted at least 14 hours. About 40 people attended, including several Nxivm counselors from Mexico, she said.

The class watched videos about Raniere and Salzman, answered large surveys about themselves and listened to Salzman's daughter, Lauren, discuss the program, Nellie Forst said.

A video camera captured everything, curtains remained closed and the room's temperature fluctuated as counselors fiddled with the thermostat, she said. Nellie Forst said breaks and meals were delayed or postponed, which caused her to feel dizzy and dehydrated.

Nxivm officials questioned her whenever she left the room — even to use the bathroom, she said.

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As she left crying, Forst said she moved a counselor who was blocking the office door. She returned to Philadelphia and the next day received an e-mail from her father saying a Nxivm counselor was filing assault and battery charges against her. Colonie police confirmed it took an incident report from Nxivm that day but would not elaborate because no arrests were made.

Her father said he received a lot of good advice from Nxivm, especially from Salzman. Using terms from the course, he said he learned “to be at cause,” or to take responsibility for his own actions instead of beating himself up; to avoid “projection,” or disliking others for doing things you yourself do and dislike; and “magnificence,” that if one increases their potential by 5 percent, the impact on others would be enormous.

Ed Forst described some of the same experiences as Nellie — pulled shades, varying room climates and some initial uncomfortable discussions — but says he didn’t interpret the actions as manipulative.

Others are working collaboratively against Nxivm. Ross and Natalie have joined forces with ex-Nxivm consultant Joseph O’Hara of Albany. All three are the targets of Nxivm lawsuits.

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Salzman, Raniere and Nxivm employee Kristen Keefe have sued Natalie for bankruptcy fraud in Albany federal court. The Keefe case is still pending.

[Nxivm sued Ross](#) in 2003 after psychiatrists called the company a [cult](#) on his Web site. The case is now in Federal District Court in Newark, N.J.

And 11 Nxivm members sued O'Hara last year, a case pending in Albany federal court. They accused O'Hara of fraudulently obtaining at least \$2.5 million in payments and loans from the company and Nxivm clients Clare and Sara Bronfman while acting as the company's lawyer. The Bronfmans are the daughters of Seagram scion Edgar Bronfman Sr. O'Hara, the former executive of the Capital Region Pontiacs and Albany Firebirds sports teams, denies wrongdoing. He said he'll repay any money owed to the Bronfmans before it's due. He established the Stop Nxivm/ESP Now Legal Defense Fund and seeks financial support from "anti-cult organizations and families whose children are Nxivm students."

Last month, days after Forbes published a story on the [Bronfman sisters' investments](#) in Nxivm, O'Hara and his fiancée found a death threat spray-painted on land he owns in New Baltimore, Greene County. The message read, "You will die in seven days," O'Hara said.

He alerted State Police, and they are investigating. Nxivm officials also have pushed for the FBI to investigate Natalie, according to her attorney, E. Stewart Jones of Troy. She responded by hiring Jones, and she and O'Hara recently took allegations of tax

fraud by Nxivm to the FBI and the U.S. attorney's office in Albany. Neither Nxivm, the FBI nor the U.S. attorney's office would confirm or deny any investigations.



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Dennis Yusko

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