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## 'Counter-Cult Deprogrammer' Faces Defamation Claim

By JONATHAN PERLOW

LOCKPORT, N.Y. (CN) - Self-help group NXIVM has accused a "counter-cult deprogrammer" of defamation in Niagara County Court, claiming it published false information pegging the group as a cult seeking to recruit college students into "some sort of psychological suicide pact."

Founded by Keith Raniere, NXIVM conducts training, coaching and ethics programs in more than 32 countries. The group says it uses a format based on "the efficacy of martial arts programs, with mentors coaches and ranks."


Two of the defendants in the defamation claim, Morris and Rochelle Sutton, enlisted purported cult expert Rick Ross, to "deprogram" their son, Michael. After taking courses with NXIVM, Michael allegedly began questioning the direction of his life and started to re-evaluate his role in his family's business, Lollytogs. The plaintiff describes the business as an "empire of global proportions."

"At significant expense," the lawsuit claims, "the Suttons hired Ross and created situations which would bring Michael Sutton into contact with Ross," so that Ross could persuade him to leave NXIVM.

But when Ross' attempts at intervention failed, he allegedly took to his Web sites, writing and linking to disparaging articles about the plaintiff.

The complaint cites an excerpt from a 2003 Forbes article, republished on rickross.com that stated, "Raniere runs a cult-like program aimed at breaking down his subjects psychologically, separating them from their families and inducing them into a bizarre world of messianic pretention, idiosyncratic language and ritualistic practices."

NXIVM claims its business "dropped off" due to the published statements. It is suing for product disparagement, defamation and interference with prospective business advantage.

It is represented by John P. Bartolomei with Bartolomei & Associates in Niagara Falls. 

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