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Ex-NXIVM student: 'I think it's a cult'

Woman details 25-month ordeal and almost leaving her family as a student of NXIVM's Executive Success Program

By JAMES M. ODATO Capitol Bureau Published 5:00 am, Tuesday, September 7, 2010

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Becca Friedman talks about her times as a student of NXIVM in her home in Woodstock, NY on August 23, 2010. Her daughter Katya Bush listens in the background. (Lori Van Buren / Times Union)

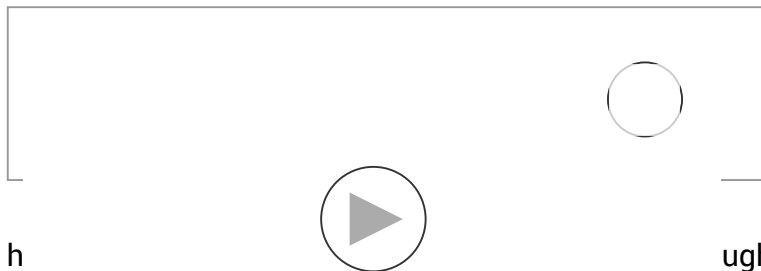
During most of her 25 months as a student of self-improvement programs run by the Colonie-based **NXIVM organization**, **Becca Friedman** felt like she was in a dream, but she said, it became a dreadful nightmare.

"It felt like a very safe, very safe environment," she said. "It did not end well."

Her story, she said, may be useful to people proposing to join or already studying at NXIVM something she would not recommend. She is one of an estimated 12,000 people who have gone through programs offered by the business during its 13 years, about 500 of whom have become coaches, as Friedman was to become at the time she abruptly left.

"Yeah, I think it's a cult," Friedman said at the dinner table of the modest home she shares with her family and a few pets not far from the funky downtown of Woodstock. "I definitely acknowledge there are good parts to it. ... You have to have a good hook. They had me hooked but not enough."

Her traumatic break happened more than three years ago. It happened after Friedman, 41, packed her car and left her two daughters and husband in the spring of 2007 to move to Clifton Park to be closer to NXIVM, something many people from many parts of the United States and other countries have done. The organization is also known as Executive Success Programs. Friedman had been promoted after two years of wearing a white sash as a student to the next level, yellow sash, and was being trained to become an unpaid coach while continuing to pay the \$182 monthly fees plus other assorted other costs for extra training, parenting classes and "intensives."



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lives. Most of the students, she said, were like her -- dealing with problems of self-esteem

With her yellow sash came more expectations for recruiting and new curriculum, she said, and more demands on her time.

Sitting beside **Adam Bush**, 43, her daughter, Friedman, in a clear, serious tone, she said she had moved her family away from home. Many of the students had possessed answers to issues in the

Friedman was not about to leave, she explained, after two years of self-awareness training. She had bared her innermost fears with many others like herself. And she had endured scores of one-on-one counseling sessions that led her to believe that the most important thing in life was to find joy. She had come to believe that she was happiest in the midst of the like-minded people enrolled in NXIVM.

The program, she said, had improved her self-confidence and health. She wanted to immerse herself in the NXIVM community by moving to the Albany area, like so many others had done. So move she did, using a vague plan that involved moving into a bedroom

in another NXIVM devotee's home, a place set up like a hostel for NXIVM students from around the world, one of a several homes offering lodging owned and operated by NXIVM officials in Capital Region neighborhoods.

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"It was like an addiction," Friedman said of NXIVM. She quit after an emotional and psychologically draining 48 hours that climaxed when her husband drove to Colonie and confronted her with a file of news stories and Internet material about NXIVM and brainwashing techniques used by cults.

She said she had previously disregarded warnings about NXIVM from her husband, with whom she was having some difficulties because of what she said was his lack of attentiveness to the family. He would sometimes say the group was "cultlike" but generally went along with his wife's quest to deal with feelings of unhappiness, he said.

But on the day after she moved out, with her children upset, Friedman accepted her husband's file. He demanded she look at information he had gathered about NXIVM. "I didn't understand why he was angry; that's how screwed up my head was," Friedman said.

Bush said he told his wife he would respect her decision, but it needed to be an informed one. "I said you've got to read it, I'm not leaving until you do," he recalled. "I knew I had to act quick before she cemented things up there."

As she read, she started sweating, felt dizzy and nauseated, she said. "Once I read the EM part I knew I had to get out," she said.

"EMs" -- short for a NXIVM tool called exploration of meaning -- were one-on-one question-and-answer sessions in which a higher ranking NXIVM official queries a subordinate member, sometimes for a charge. The talks are supposed to help the less advanced student deal with a conflict. Friedman had received about 100. Her husband had found articles describing such sessions as manipulative.

Indeed, **Rick Ross**, a New Jersey-based cult tracker sued by NXIVM for trade secrets violations because he exposed some of its techniques and posted critiques by a psychologist and a psychiatrist, said the EMs are similar to auditing done in Scientology. They can be manipulated depending on the questions asked, he claimed.

The last two EMs Friedman received were key to supporting her decision to leave her family at least for the summer, she said. They were conducted by people she trusted and respected in the organization -- "higher-ups" -- who fledgling students of NXIVM are told on their first day to respect and honor with special handshakes. They are also distinguished by the bright sashes they wear.

One EM was led by **Barbara Jeske**, a longtime NXIVM devotee and third in the hierarchy of the organization. Possessor of a purple sash, Jeske had ascended to the heights of NXIVM President **Nancy Salzman**, a nurse/hypnotist and therapist who developed the EM training, was Jeske's coach. Friedman said Jeske had recruited Friedman in March 2005, calling her with course information and insisting on meeting her after Friedman, who had applied online to NXIVM, told her she could not afford the programs. They met at a diner. Within 90 minutes Jeske agreed to pay for Friedman's coursework until she could pay her back. At that time Friedman was in nursing school and Friedman was unemployed.

Jeske, of Clifton Park, had ascended in the organization partly because of her prodigious recruiting, people familiar with the organization say.

When Friedman left her family, she spent the first night with Jeske, but she was tearful and feeling unsure of her decision. Jeske led an EM in which Friedman concluded her husband was manipulative, Friedman said. But in her heart it did not ring true, she said.

The next day she unloaded her possessions at the Clifton Park home of **Esther Chiappone**, green sash who had moved from Alaska with her four children. Chiappone was part of Jeske's organization, having been enrolled under her. Like Jeske, Chiappone had risen in the organization in part through her successful recruiting. But Chiappone also housed NXIVM students for a charge.

Her home had become a sort of NXIVM hostel, Friedman said. Besides Chiappone and her children, another woman and her daughter were living at the Chiappone residence, as well as four others, some from Mexico, according to Friedman. She planned to move in and have her two daughters join her there. Other homes in the Capital Region were also available for group housing of NXIVM students, Friedman said. She and her oldest daughter had found quarters in such housing when they took five-day intensives. They paid \$20 a night at a

NXIVM person's home near Wolf Road, she said.

Friedman said Jeske had become a mentor and they talked at length. She said in their first meeting Jeske said she always wanted a baby. In the spring of 2007, she said, Jeske told her how a friend had called with the opportunity to adopt a boy born to the woman's daughter, who had died in childbirth or shortly after. Jeske and another woman drove a long way to adopt the baby, Friedman recalled. She said when she was in Jeske's home she was surprised to learn from Jeske the baby, Gaelen, was living elsewhere, in a home closer to Keith Raniere, the charismatic leader of NXIVM. Other people familiar with the boy's upbringing say he is being raised by another NXIVM devotee in a home seconds from Raniere's residence and that several nannies attend to him, each speaking strictly in a foreign language.

"I felt that Barbara, especially of all the high-ranking people, would definitely have a better grip on what was best for the little boy than I would," Friedman said. The situation didn't sit right with her, Friedman said.

She now believes Jeske steered her to the conclusion that her husband did not adequately address her needs. Bush, in an interview, said he had reservations about NXIVM but went along with his wife's self-help quest and took action only when she made the dramatic move of breaking away.

After the EM with Jeske, Friedman said, she went to the NXIVM headquarters on New Karner Road. She said Bush called, angry at her and telling her that her daughter was feeling similarly, and that he was coming to talk to her. Friedman said feelings of dread enveloped her.

Seeing her distressed, another friend, chiropractor **Edward Kinum**, of Scotia, conducted an EM with her right there at the cafe in the headquarters.

"Ed gave me my last EM," Friedman said. "It was on the basis of me losing my kids. Wouldn't it make sense to be happy alone? One choice was me with my family not feeling happy not feeling fulfilled; and the other choice was not having my family and being alone. It was the only time with an EM feeling really trapped and Ed was somebody I loved and trusted. I didn't want to leave my family; but the only way to make the EM end was to pick being alone."

She said the session with Kinum, an orange sash who was the boyfriend of Chiappone at the time, lasted 20 minutes.

She said it was difficult going back to Chiappone's home and collecting her things after Bush's materials made her second-guess NXIVM. Chiappone asked her why she was leaving. When told, Chiappone asked why she believed what was written in news stories and on the Internet about NXIVM, Friedman said.

Jeske and Chiappone did not respond to telephone calls. But Kinum said he recalls the counseling session he gave Friedman, whom he knew well. He denied steering her or anyone else in the dozens of EMs he has led.

He said he was not aware of what happened to Friedman. He also said he recently stopped training and teaching at NXIVM after 13 years. He said he has become unsettled by controversies arising from litigation involving NXIVM and former members which have become public this year. He also said that he is a big fan of the curriculum although he would not want his children to enroll at this time.

Top officers and benefactors have denied that NXIVM is a cult, through their lawyer, Robert Crockett. He said the organization is built around a martial arts theme and is part of the human growth industry that includes the popular Tony Robbins. The philosophies, he said, mirror some found in the writings of Ayn Rand but with more of an altruistic component.

Three years removed from the organization, Friedman said there is no doubt she has changed for the better because of instruction in NXIVM -- from a selfish, angry woman who blamed others and external things for being in a rut. But she said she could have gotten the same place on her own. In NXIVM, she said, "they teach you that you don't need anyone or anything to be fully actualized, or 'at cause,' as they call it, but you do need NXIVM."

She said it was tough to pull away from a group that was so alluring. With a \$9.95 self-help book like "Zero Limits" and Buddhist spiritual study, she said, she has learned that the same principles are available without relying on NXIVM.

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