

Child of the Cult

Anouree Treena-Byrne was raised in a cult until she was 17. Now 46, she tells **Debi Marshall** about the horrors of the childhood of isolation and punishment she endured.

PHOTOGRAPHY ● SCOTT HAWKINS

Born in 1970, Anouree was quietly abducted from her mother at birth and spirited away to Eildon in country Victoria where she was raised, along with 17 other children, by Anne Hamilton-Byrne and an army of cruel “aunties”, all obsequious devotees of The Family. That she survived a horrific childhood of extreme physical abuse and emotional deprivation is in itself remarkable. That she survived with her sanity intact, even more so.

It's been 20 years since Anouree and I first met. Then 26, she'd been liberated from the cult only nine years earlier and her emotional wounds from that torturous life were still fresh and raw. Two decades on, she's barely aged; her pale skin, compliments of a childhood deficient in sunlight, is unlined and her dark, short hair frames a pixie face. At 46, Anouree is a beguiling hybrid of Audrey Hepburn-esque street urchin and grunge chic, with the gamine look of a waif. And she hasn't changed: still intense and engaging, her large green eyes are windows to a reflective soul and questions are met with thoughtful pauses before she answers. Re-dressed after the photo shoot into a

comfortable, striped, hand-knitted jumper, Indian cotton pants and well-worn Blundstones, she rolls her own cigarettes as we talk, her conversation disarmingly direct even as she discusses being on the autism spectrum. “I was diagnosed with Asperger's in the late '80s,” she says, candidly. “Undoubtedly, the environment we grew up in wouldn't have helped.” Anouree is speaking today about *The Family* documentary, presently in limited cinema release around Australia, in which she and other former cult children reminisce on their nightmare life with Hamilton-Byrne and the police investigation, which led, finally, to their release.

Anne Hamilton-Byrne was the mistress of duplicity and disguise. Yet the truth about her past – and her meteoric rise to becoming the self-proclaimed “one true master”

and “reincarnation of Jesus Christ” – was rather more pedestrian than she would have people believe.

Born plain Evelyn Edwards into a humble Gippsland family haunted by mental illness, Evelyn, an overweight child with the nickname “Puddy”, was the daughter of a railway cleaner whose self-obsession led to a re-imagining of her reality. She taught yoga in Melbourne before realising financial enlightenment lay in the recruitment of cult members – easily manipulated middle-class professionals, many with medical backgrounds – into the sect she co-founded with spiritual academic Dr Raynor Johnson. Taking the surname of her second husband, Bill Hamilton-Byrne, whom she married in the '70s, this charismatic blonde held sect members spellbound with her hotch-potch of New Age spiritualism and Eastern and Western teachings, while at the same time fleecing them of their money and assets. A guru – and an empire – was born.

A house of horrors

Anouree's story starts in that most surreal of places: former Melbourne asylum, Newhaven psychiatric clinic, run by Anne Hamilton-Byrne. It was

[Real life]

Anouree Treena-Byrne is one of several former children of The Family cult to successfully sue its founder, Anne Hamilton-Byrne, for the mental and physical abuse they suffered.



here, where many medical staff – some established members of The Family – and vulnerable patients were targeted in a zealous recruitment drive. It's also where Anouree's parents, patients Treena and Michael, Anne Hamilton-Byrne's step-son, fell in love. "It was a house of horrors," Anouree says with a shudder. "Anne manipulated her way into ownership of the clinic and once she got it, it gave her power to do what she wished with defenceless patients."

Here, hidden from the outside world, sedatives and the hallucinogenic drug, LSD, were administered to patients without their knowledge and controversial treatments, including electroconvulsive therapy and lobotomies, were trialled.

Against her will, Treena, a desperately vulnerable woman who

suffered episodic bouts of mental illness, was given a range of potent drugs, including LSD, even when pregnant with Anouree at 22. "My father was also given LSD. It was a means of keeping them subjugated."

Shockingly, it also gave Hamilton-Byrne, who owned other cult properties,

the opportunity to exploit Treena and procure her baby.

"It was a nice little transaction for Anne," Anouree says. "There was no paperwork required.

I was taken away to the sect soon after I was born, to live with the other children there who were 'acquired' through the scamming and manipulation of vulnerable parents using false birth certificates. We were then all given Anne's surname."

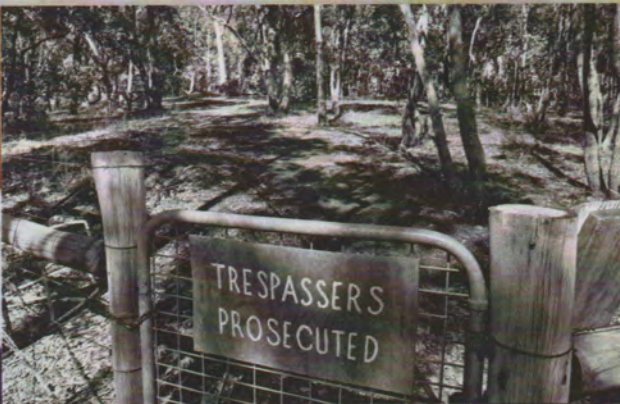
There, at Kai Lama, an isolated rural property on Lake Eildon sandwiched

between national parks and a lake, up to 22 people were jammed into a heavily curtained, claustrophobic house that reeked of cats. Remote from the world, this would be Anouree's life for the next 17 years.

The loss of her daughter, whom Treena repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to wrest from Hamilton-Byrne, sent the young mother over the edge into madness. Heartbroken and distressed, she made several suicide attempts until, in 1974, at the age of 26, she overdosed on medication at her family home, dying a lonely death.

Anouree has no memories of her mother and grew to adulthood believing Anne and her husband, Bill, were her parents, not her grandparents. While being Bill's granddaughter afforded her no special attention, Anouree somehow escaped Anne's decree of the children dressing in identical outfits and dyeing their hair peroxide blonde. Yet she bitterly

“We were half-starved and had to steal food.”



FROM FAR LEFT: Child members of The Family with their eerily identical blonde hair; the entrance to the Lake Elidon cult property; 14 of The Family children; Anne Hamilton-Byrne and (below) with her husband outside court in Melbourne in 1993.



recalls other ways that she and her “siblings” were controlled. “I shared a small bedroom with up to eight girls. We were home-schooled with a perfunctory education and out of bed every day at 5am with a punishing routine of yoga and meditation. We were half-starved all the time and had to steal food from neighbours to survive.”

Beaten for the slightest misdemeanour and forced to take large quantities of tranquilisers, which rendered them robotic, it was a restrictive and horrific regimen, which enabled Anne to control every facet of their lives. “There was no maternal love, no joy,” Anouree recalls. “It wasn’t a childhood at all, but because we were so isolated, we thought this was normal. I had no comprehension that other children lived differently.”

Imprisoned within the cult and quarantined from the outside world, Anouree withdrew emotionally, becoming virtually mute. “I was timid and shy. It was a way of hiding from the world while still being in it.”

Memories of the extreme violence they endured renders Anouree mute again briefly. “You can’t imagine the horror of being held down and [almost] suffocated in a bucket of water,

which happened to all of us about four times. The whole point was to terrify us into absolute submission, but it didn’t work. Regardless of what was thrown at us, Anne couldn’t stop our natural response for survival.”

Freedom Day

Anouree and the other children’s escape from this daily hell – what she describes as “Freedom Day” – came suddenly in 1987, when the cult’s property was raided at 7am by

Australian Federal Police and Community Services Victoria. Then 17, Anouree was in a yoga session, which was interrupted by unfamiliar voices and loud footsteps. “One of my older sisters had run away from the cult and had alerted authorities to what was going on at Eildon,” she says. “She flew into the room and announced to us all, ‘You’re free!’”

Herded onto a bus, six of the children were removed to a home where Anouree stayed for three years.

Yet, if life outside the cult was liberating, she also found it extremely challenging to adapt to the change. It would take her many years of counselling to unravel the complex, twisted childhood she and the other children had endured. “I didn’t know I had a mother or father until I came out of the sect,” she says. “Sadly, Mum was dead by then, but Dad and I got on really well when we met. He described Anne as a manipulative monster; a woman who moved people around like chess pieces on a board.” Her dad, Michael, died in 2013, a loss that Anouree still grieves. »



Following the liberation of the children, Hamilton-Byrne and her husband, Bill – whom Anouree describes as “another victim” – fled Australia for six years. In 1993, following an investigation into their activities, they were arrested in the Catskills, New York, and extradited to Australia. The couple pleaded guilty to charges of conspiracy to defraud and commit perjury by falsely registering children’s births and were fined \$5000 each, but received no prison time.

Anouree says that the punishment was ridiculously inadequate as she ponders the legacy of her life in the sect. “For me, it’s periodic depression and a degree of social anxiety,” she says. “But I’ve fared better than other cult children, some of whom have died premature, awful deaths. Mostly, I have a positive take on life.”

At 22, Anouree started a Bachelor of Arts degree at university before teaching English in Japan for three years. Prior to leaving for overseas, she confronted Anne Hamilton-Byrne about what had happened to her mother. In a brazen response, the cult leader told Anouree that Treena had “accidentally ingested rat poison” and died. Anouree remains contemptuous of her answer. “I told her that we both knew that was absolute nonsense, which, of course, she denied.” She has not seen Hamilton-Byrne since.

Facing the future

In 2004, Anouree met David, who would father her two children, a girl and boy aged six and 10. The children have exotic names the couple invented, but she won’t publicise them, to protect their privacy. She is determined her children will have a happier childhood than she experienced. “I erased everything I learned from Anne regarding child-raising,” she says. “I use my natural instincts to guide me.”



“Anne stole my past ... not my future.”

Bill died in 2001 and, today, Anne Hamilton-Byrne is a shadow of the once-dominant sect leader whose story made headlines around the world. Now in her 90s, she spends her days rocking back and forth at an aged care facility in suburban Melbourne. Lost and regressed, her once sharp and devious mind ravaged by the grey fog of advanced dementia, she is visited by

BELOW: Anne Hamilton-Byrne in 2009 in the nursing home room she rarely leaves.



an ever-diminishing band of elderly cult members who know conversation is futile. She has never shown remorse and Anouree has no interest in seeing her before she dies – no interest, no feelings for her and no compassion.

“Behind the scenes, there is a power struggle for her money and assets, reputed to be in the tens of millions,” she says. “It’s ironic, isn’t it, that the woman who created a virtual prison for mentally ill people and for children now lives in something of a prison herself, both physically and mentally.”

Anouree believes that any remaining cult assets should be sold after Hamilton-Byrne’s death and paid as compensation to her victims, some of whom, including Anouree, have won damages for

ongoing mental health issues relating to their abusive childhoods. And while the cult is still active, it is a ragged empire compared with its glory days.

Recently separated from David, Anouree is not frightened that she will become a “lonely only” – one of her invented expressions. “I know it isn’t conventional, but David and I have decided that it is best the children stay with him and I remain in constant contact with them,” she says. Now planning the next stage of her life, she is going to live in Scotland for a time to study human biology and is excited that her world is full of possibilities.

“Doing the documentary on The Family was liberating in itself,” she says, resolutely. “Anne stole my past, but I’m not going to let her steal my present and my future. I do not identify as a Family cult member any longer. I have a strong sense of survival and am my own person. That is both my revenge and my triumph.” **AWW**

If you or someone you know needs emotional support, phone Lifeline 13 11 14.