

## **In response to CNN's "Young man's suicide blamed on mother's cult By Randi Kaye CNN" (airing December 4th on CNN)**

From Claire Borowik for [the Family International](http://www.thefamily.org)

December 4, 2007

Contact: Claire Borowik, Public Affairs Desk for The Family International, [publicaffairs@thefamily.org](mailto:publicaffairs@thefamily.org)

It is disappointing that a reputable network such as CNN would publish such sensationalistic, poorly researched material. The bias and lack of balance displayed in this program transcript are highly unprofessional and discriminatory. Although I was unable to participate in their program due to the fact that I was overseas at the time, contrary to what was published, I provided statements and other materials for their program.

It is clear that the intent of this program was to discredit Karen Zerby, current co-administrative and spiritual overseer of The Family International. Ricky Rodriguez never accused his mother of abusive actions whether in his video, or in his multitudinous internet rants, and the tale told by alleged "witnesses," specifically Davida Kelley, is absolutely false. Ricky did not "escape" from the group as this program alleges, but rather joined the 32,000 people that have voluntarily exited our movement over the past 30 years. His mother was supportive of his decision and assisted him financially for several years after his departure to establish himself.

Court findings paint a very different picture of Karen Zerby and the efforts she has made to ensure the safety and well-being of Family members, both young and old. Justice Ward made note of this role in his custody ruling: "I am now totally satisfied that The Family, I would think largely at Maria's prompting, has since 1986 made determined and sustained efforts to stamp out child sexual abuse and to prevent any inappropriate contact between adults and children whether young children or teenage children. I have no evidence that child sex abuse is presently prevalent any more within The Family than outside it." (Family Division, Case W 42 1992, London, England, October 19, 1995).

The Family International's success in protecting our children and enforcing our zero tolerance policy for the protection of minors has been documented by court-appointed and independent investigations in the early '90s of almost 700 children living in Family communities. After extensive physical, psychological and educational testing, all of the children were found to be healthy with no sign of abuse in a single case. This total absence of abuse speaks for the efforts made to safeguard children in Family communities. I question whether random investigations would produce similar results in society at large. Not according to the Department of Health and Human Services, that reports a rate of at least 13 cases of abuse per 1,000 in the United States, with British authorities reporting close to 200 cases per 1,000.

---

## "Jesus Freaks"

This program seems to have found its impetus in Don Lattin's recently published book, "Jesus Freaks." Although Lattin's book does contain some sound research and factual information, it is laced with inaccuracies, misconceptions and erroneous conclusions lacking a factual base-not to mention, sketchy research. The stereotyping that Lattin resorts to manifests bias and religious intolerance, and an attempt to cast the Family's deeply held Christian beliefs in a negative light. His writings echo the position of anti-religious proponents, who demonize the beliefs of others and set themselves as judges as to the legitimacy of a belief system and ultimately the right to one's religious faith. His writings throughout 2005 on the Rodriguez incident reflected a similar ideology, and the preponderance of his writings have focused on ex-member allegations, while giving very little space to current member responses. "Jesus Freaks" is no different.

---

## Incidence of Suicide amongst former members

The claim that nearly 30 suicides occurred in the past 15 years has no basis in fact or official causes of death. We acknowledge that those who were once a part of our movement are as likely to succumb to social illnesses as the population at large. According to our records, however, the rate of incidence of suicide amongst the approximately 32,000 former members of the Family is far below the average in general, and in conformance to the expected rate in some age ranges.

The World Health Organization estimates that suicide is responsible for a global mortality rate of 16 per 100,000 people per year. In the last 45 years suicide rates have increased by 60% worldwide, rendering it among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44. In a period of history where the rates of suicide are rising at an alarming rate, suicide and acts of violence are virtually unknown in our fellowship.

Suicide and acts of violence are virtually unheard of in our communities. As Christians, we deplore and are diametrically opposed to acts of violence and the suffering these inflict on the innocent. We believe that human life is sacred, and each person should be respected as an individual created in the image of God. As Christians, our lives are devoted to sharing the news of God's love and salvation for humanity and caring for the needy. (For more information on our charitable activities in over a hundred countries, please see [www.thefamily.org](http://www.thefamily.org))

---

## Ricky Rodriguez and Angela Smith

The Family International was deeply saddened by the deaths of Ricky Rodriguez, son of Karen Zerby, and Angela Smith, a member of the Family for over 30 years. Ricky (1975-2005) committed suicide January 8th, 2005, after taking Angela's life. (please see [Ricky's memorial site at www.rickyrodriguez.com](http://www.rickyrodriguez.com) and [Angela Smith's memorial site at www.angela-smith.org](http://www.angela-smith.org))

In response to the controversy this tragedy generated in the media, second generation members of the Family published a blog, in order to ensure that their voices may be heard. Over 400 young people raised in the Family have posted statements and testimonials with photos. (please see [www.myconclusion.com](http://www.myconclusion.com))

Ricky Rodriguez withdrew from the Family fellowship in 2000 in order to pursue his education and other interests. Although he departed on good terms, he later became estranged from his mother and sister. After contacting some of our more vitriolic apostates, he began to manifest violent tendencies. Those who were aware of his violent intents failed to report it to authorities or seek assistance.

In searching for a motive for this tragic crime, the media should take care to not casually write off Angela's death and justify the actions of an obviously disturbed young man acting out his misplaced anger. Our society is rife with violence-regularly the public is exposed to violent crimes of individuals that act out the violence they witness via the media, and discuss anonymously via the internet. Such crimes are not particular to religious groups-in fact such violence is shocking and entirely unheard of in Family communities.

The Family International, formerly known as the Children of God, is a fellowship of Christian missionaries dedicated to preaching the Gospel around the world. Members have received Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and live and work together in small communities. Founded by [David Brandt Berg](#) (1919-1994) in Southern California during the late '60s, the Family has expanded into an international missionary fellowship located in over 100 countries around the world. Approximately two-thirds of The Family's full-time membership is comprised of second and third generation members. See [www.thefamily.org](http://www.thefamily.org)