

BREAKING THE SILENCE, LIFTING THE SHAME

Three brave women who were sexually abused as kids and teens at Centrepoint are coming forward in a new documentary — and starting a truth and reconciliation process for former community members, writes **Anke Richter**

It happened only a week ago, at the school office where she works. “I’ve been sexually abused,” Kate Rowntree told a colleague when explaining why she is appearing on television soon. It took the 56-year-old 40 years to say these words. They suddenly slipped out and made her feel quite self-conscious. She never thought she would say them out loud. The teacher has been living in silence for decades about her teenage years at Centrepoint, New Zealand’s infamous “sex cult”. Next week she is finally coming forward in a new documentary alongside two other women who’ve all since become friends — and are now initiating a restorative justice process.

Kate was 13 when her mother, one of the founding community members who had been doing encounter groups with therapist Bert Potter in the mid-70s, wanted her and her sister to come and live at the residential community that the salesman-come-guru had started on a sprawling property outside Albany. Members had to share everything as a big tribal family — meals, clothes, sleeping quarters and partners. Even births were a communal event.

“I was a completely innocent pre-pubescent and remember feeling enormously uncomfortable, looking at these big Indian cushions in the living room where people were cuddling or more,” Kate recalls. “The first five days especially were just awful.”

The toilets had no walls between them. The open ablation blocks served as one of many means in this human experiment to break down shame and barriers between people.

Potter called himself God and his instructions — referred to as “Bert says” — were religious doctrine. Tasks given by the self-appointed therapist, like eating off the floor or sleeping with a new person each day, conditioned his followers to conform with the cult’s ideology. It also led them to override their own instincts and values about what was right and wrong, especially around incest.

The teenager eventually adjusted to the new environment and made friends. They were left to their own devices out of sight from the outside world, surrounded by beautiful native bush, lawns, and later a pool and a tennis court. But despite those freedoms and the bohemian lifestyle, it was also a predatory patriarchal setup with a strong hierarchy where coercion and sexual transgression flourished. Naked men were watching girls when they showered.

Early on Kate learned to avoid the omnipresent father figure, Bert Potter. “To access the bedrooms, you had to walk along a long veranda. Every day when coming back to my room, I tried to predict which back route would be the safest so that Bert wouldn’t be coming towards me. He had a terrible leer. The message I got was that he was watching me.”

For her and many of the children, the apparently amazing leader so full of love was in fact frightening. “There was psychological abuse before the sexual abuse started.” Some girls put on weight or didn’t wash to make themselves unattractive.



Others put on overly flirty personas to comply. The pressure to become sexually active at an early age was huge because the “free children” who gave in to it gained status. They were forced into weekend workshops where older women instructed and watched them masturbate. Couples were often broken off and promiscuity encouraged, at all ages. “It was a survival mechanism for many of us to ‘go off’ with Bert and others,” says Kate. “We were told it was good for us and would help us not to be ‘blocked’ like our parents.”

Some parents were oblivious, others tried at times to speak up but were shut down. Many were complicit, pushing their underage daughters into Potter’s arms or letting them fondle toddlers. Women became abusers too. The lines between brainwashed followers and perpetrators were blurred. Potter’s two right hand women were called the “thought police”, sending girls off to “sex therapy” with the ageing spiritual leader, where some of his victims were drugged and raped.

To get away, Kate made up an excuse in 1982 regarding her scholarship in the US. Potter was angry with her leaving. “Once I was out, I felt profound relief. I didn’t initially connect that relief with any awareness about my abuse. Instead, I told myself it had been a great place.”

In 1990, actress Sarah Smuts-Kennedy brought charges against Potter along with about 40 other victims. A decade later, Kate was pregnant with her second child. She met her husband Mike Rowntree at Centrepoint when they were both teenagers. His father was also one of the founders, and the son was badly affected by the broken family dynamics and the common narrative that “CP” was an idyllic place full of “loving” — a word he still hates.

For years, Mike struggled with mental health issues while Kate was holding it all together.

“I just felt too vulnerable to be involved,” she says, sitting in her Hawke’s Bay home. Only when the police approached her with records obtained from Centrepoint that listed all her medical treatments, something started to shift. “I actually

realised that I had been abused. When I went and saw a therapist after that, it was the first time that someone called it rape.” It was still all too much to process for her then. “I really admired the women who did step up, that was amazingly courageous. I always felt guilty that I hadn’t been brave enough.”

She shut it all away because it felt too hard to look at, “a void that would swallow me up”. As with most families who had lived at Centrepoint, nothing was ever discussed later. The stigma associated with the headlines and court cases didn’t help. The longer the silence lasted, the heavier the shame weighed on her. “For a very, very long time my mother didn’t believe me and my younger sister. I think she only accepted what happened just before she died. That was a big night.”

It was only through meeting Caroline Anslay two years ago that Kate finally found the courage to step up as well. In 2016, the Christchurch GP had started the Centrepoint Restoration Project, a networking forum for former community members to share their stories and find support. They got in touch with each other.

Caroline was left behind at Centrepoint when she was only 7 years old. She became “abnormally melancholic” at the community, she says. “I was a little boat tossed around at sea, feeling invaded on a daily basis.” She had also pushed her own dark memories of neglect and child sexual abuse aside until she came across the 2013 book *Surviving Centrepoint*, written under the pseudonym “Ella James”.

“Reading her account had the most profound impact on me,” the 45-year-old recalls. “I had kept my story quietly to myself. Now I knew it wasn’t just me. It empowered me to bring it up with people in my life. I had to ask myself what’s worse — fear of exposure or the disappointment of not advocating for the right thing?”

The book’s author is also coming forward under her real name for the first time. Rachel King moved to Centrepoint as a teenager in its later years when drugs were secretly manufactured on the property and taken in large groups, including by children. Rachel was abused during one of those sessions in the Glade while high on ecstasy, and on other occasions. Because those events were hard to pinpoint time-wise, she could only take one of her abusers to court later. He got a year of home detention. The 46-year-old spent years in therapy and became an outcast in her own family.

All three women met when they were filmed for *Heaven and Hell*, the docudrama that airs on TVNZ next Sunday. They never met at Centrepoint because all had lived there at different times during a period spanning from 1977 until 1991. The female-led production around director Natalie Malcom included a counsellor for all interviewees.

Watching the film together at a private screening just for the women earlier this year brought new revelations for them. There were tears, hugs and instant bonding.

None of them had experienced that kind of connection and care about their conflicting past before. Rachel’s family is divided over her book,



Caroline and her dog at the Centrepoint Community (left) and today, right.



FROM UTOPIAN DREAM TO COLLECTIVE NIGHTMARE

● Centrepoint was started in 1977 by Bert Potter, a former pest control salesman who had returned from Rajneesh’s ashram in Pune, India, and created a following as an unconventional sex therapist.

● The site in Albany became New Zealand’s largest intentional community, with more than 350 people at its peak.

● Police raided the community in 1990, convicted Potter of drug charges and in 1992, when he was aged 67, he was convicted of sexual assault and rape. His victims were between 3 and 15. He was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison. Seven other men and two women were also imprisoned, more convictions followed.

● Centrepoint was closed in 2000 after a lengthy court battle and later became Kawai Purapura, a wellness centre. Until his death in 2012, Potter maintained he had done nothing wrong. A 2010 study by Massey University found one out of three children at Centrepoint had suffered sexual abuse there.

criticised it and called her a drama queen. “It’s a validation that it wasn’t just me,” says the Auckland physiotherapist on a group call with the two others. “That I wasn’t lying, I didn’t make this up. Here are two other amazing strong women standing beside me.”

Finding their voices on camera and watching their childhood memories re-enacted on screen empowered them further. Together, they’re now brave enough to openly speak about the unresolved pain and trauma that the cult inflicted on many of its second generation — and to ask for better ways to address it.

This week the three launched an “Open Letter to the Former Members of the Centrepoint Community”. It’s the next step in their healing process as well as a historical #metoo moment for New Zealand.

“We ask you to hear our voices,” it says. “We advocate for an organised, public and collective response to acknowledge and address the past which damaged the children of the community. We ask that you work with us to find ways to enable healing and restoration of the history.” The letter writers didn’t make specific requests regarding what these amendments should look like.

In the lead-up to it, Caroline received unsolicited feedback from two prominent leaders of the community telling her that attempts to address the problematic history her way won’t work. “Does that mean because we don’t deliver a solution on a platter, you don’t need to go there and can keep controlling people?” she now asks them back. “We want you to acknowledge our reality. There are ways that work and that have meaning, for instance if you look at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from South Africa.”

Besides such a facilitated process, their initiative could also get more Centrepoint children the right support. Counselling is often not an option for them because therapy was forced down their throats in the community’s workshops. Many who need therapy the most don’t trust mental health professionals.

Ideally, the letter might inspire a collective apology from the Centrepoint adults, similar to the one given by the first generation of the Friedrichshof commune in Austria in 2010. The group operated around the same time and under similar principles as Centrepoint, led by radical artist Otto Muehl, and even had visitors from Centrepoint who brought back more ideas. It had the same disastrous consequences including jail sentences.

Vocal victim support groups of “Otto’s children” formed. But in New Zealand, the silence by hundreds of adults who turned a utopian dream into a collective nightmare and left many damaged is still deafening, decades later.

The women on the call discuss the final changes to the letter. They want it to sound less angry. “It’s not a crusade,” says Rachel, “we’re not forcing it on anyone. Why would we try to engage people that aren’t ready to look at this issue, and at all of us?” Kate nods. “I’m really proud of it.” She smiles. “This has been an incredible process.”

It’s only been days since she also told the principal at her school. Everything is still raw for her. She’s not sure whether she wants to reconcile with everyone who condoned, ignored or enabled her abuse. “I personally don’t want to have anything to do with them.” She pauses. “But I do want acknowledgement from certain people, that would make a difference. I’m kind of fine in my life, but it’s for something bigger than just me.”

At the end of their meeting, Caroline shows them photos of herself at Browns Bay in 1983. The little girl with short hair is wearing a white dress and holding hands with a Centrepoint friend. That girl was also abused at an early age. Not everyone they knew back then is doing fine. The women mention hard drugs, suicide attempts and prostitution.

“We are the lucky ones,” they agree. Not just because they’ve survived without addiction or self-harm, had their children and careers. But because they’ve found each other. “We have so much support now that we can pass on,” says Caroline. “Truth tells.” ●

● *Heaven and Hell — The Centrepoint Story* Sunday, May 30 at 8.30 pm on TVNZ 1