

# The Professor And the Guru

For twenty years David Burrows lived the American dream. Then he left his family, friends, and teaching career behind to follow Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.

By Jim Popkin

**D**avid Burrows propped himself up on his elbows and surveyed his surroundings—a long, rectangular building with all the intimacy of an airplane hangar. Some 4,000 men and women were assembled around him, waiting in random clusters on a cold, yellow linoleum floor. Like Burrows, they all wore identical beaded necklaces. Their clothing, with few exceptions, was deep red.

It was Saturday night, and Burrows was famished. He had worked since early morning clearing dirt roads with a bulldozer, but dinner was not scheduled for at least another two hours. Food could wait.

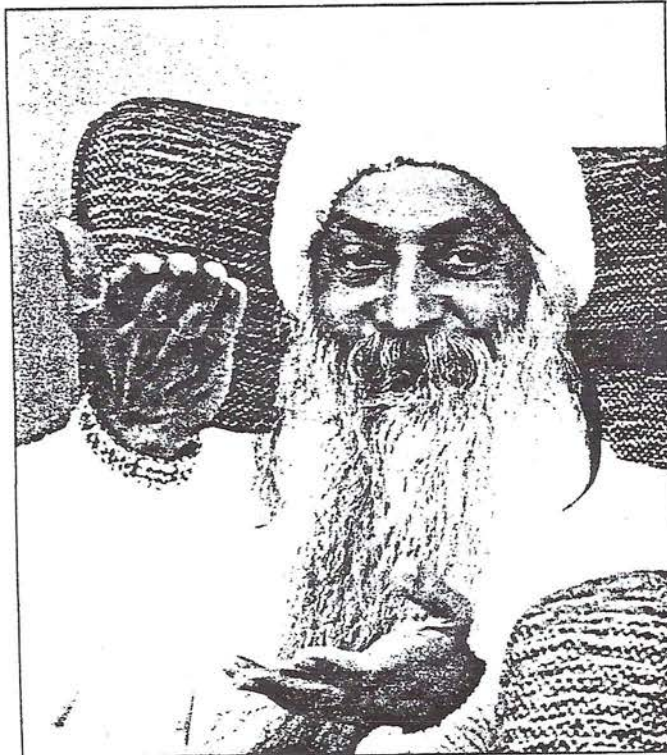
The lights in the makeshift auditorium suddenly went out, and Burrows gazed upward at a full-length movie screen suspended from the ceiling. All around him there was a hush, as tiny images of a bearded man in sandals and a flowing white robe were reflected in 8,000 attentive eyes.

The storyteller on the screen eased into a high-backed armchair and began to speak, softly and deliberately. His eyes stared straight ahead and seemingly defied nature, blinking once or twice every few minutes. Two hours later, when he had finished, he clasped his hands and was still.

Burrows crouched forward and his head fell to his knees. Slowly, he recited in Sanskrit, "I go to the feet of the Awakened One. I go to the feet of the Commune of the Awakened One. I go to the feet of the Ultimate Truth of the Awakened One." The building rumbled as thousands of voices breathed the same, slow, guttural chant into the yellow linoleum.

It was 8:30 PM. Now they could eat.

Until late last year, 49-year-old David Burrows ended every day of the week in much



David Burrows left his home in New Jersey five years ago to be near his spiritual master, the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, above. Later, a bearded and "enlightened" Burrows, opposite, was joined by two of his children, Dara and Jamie, at the guru's commune in Oregon.

the same fashion. It was a strange ritual, but stranger still considering Burrows's background. Why was a Rutgers University literature professor with four children, tenure, and a spacious, 140-year-old stone house in Millstone bowing to a video icon in a clammy auditorium in rural Oregon?

The answer may be found in three mysterious words: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.

Before he established himself in America as the guru with a soft spot for Swiss bank accounts and \$100,000 Rolls-Royces, Rajneesh was just another Indian-born philosophy professor. Although an official biography explains that he attained enlightenment on March 21, 1953, at the age of 22, the miracle must have gone unnoticed for

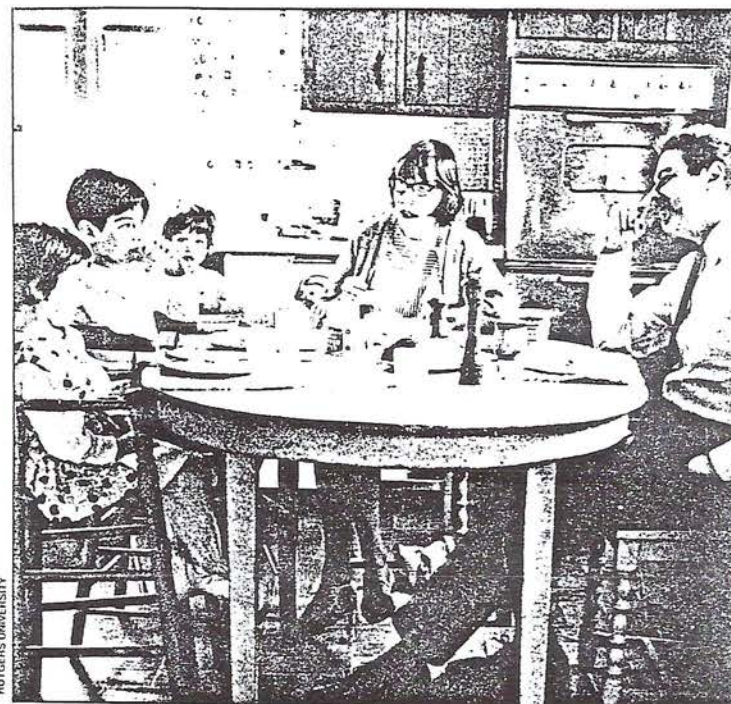
years. The son of a prosperous cloth merchant, Rajneesh taught philosophy in relative obscurity at a university in Jabalpur, India, during the 1960s, before embarking on a lengthy whistle-stop tour of India. While espousing his views on religion, free love, and the benefits of meditation throughout his homeland, Rajneesh began marketing transcripts and cassette tapes of his public discourses. For most of the 20 to 30 New Jersey natives who would later follow Rajneesh to his embattled, and now defunct, Rancho Rajneesh commune in eastern Oregon, these books and tapes were the first long-distance murmurs of a man who could soothe the troubling emotions inside them.

A blend of traditional Eastern religious wisdom and pop Western psychology, Rajneesh's teachings appealed as much to successful and sophisticated middle-aged professionals as to outcast teenagers. Some followers saw Rajneeshism as a philosophy; some saw it as therapy. Others were simply seduced by Rajneesh's soft voice and his promises of a better life.

For David Burrows, the attraction was purely emotional. Although his entire academic career had trained him to subject scholarly works to critical analyses, Burrows's respect for Rajneesh sprang from his heart, not from his mind. From the moment he laid eyes on the balding Indian philosopher, he had felt a rush, as feverish and impulsive as love itself.

The year was 1978, and friends of Burrows had encouraged him to travel with them to Poona, India, home of Rajneesh's first religious enclave, or ashram. "I remember walking up to a building called Buddah Hall," he recalls. "At the time, Rajneesh's disciples were wearing orange clothing. I walked in, in my green shirt and blue pants, and some-





*In 1965, straightlaced David Burrows, left, was a popular literature professor at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. He lived a seemingly picture-perfect life in a 140-year-old home in Millstone, above, with his first wife, Sandra, and their children Dara, Mark, and Jamie.*

thing just hit me. It was just the first hit I got off him."

Rajneesh's daily discourse had barely ended when Burrows headed for the ashram's central office to register as a follower, or sennyasin. "I remember saying to myself, 'I'll do this now and think about it later.'"

Eight years later, Burrows has stopped second-guessing his decision. His name is now Swami Das Anudas, and the locker-sized photograph of Rajneesh dangling from his neck is but one telltale sign of Burrows's complete devotion to his spiritual master. But Burrows hasn't always played the role of the loyal follower.

"When David Burrows was at Rutgers he was a bit of a guru. He was attracting students like flypaper. Everybody was in love with him," recalls Michael Rockland, chairman of the Rutgers American Studies department. Rockland has interviewed Burrows extensively for a novel he is writing about a Rutgers professor who decides to become a Rajneeshee. "He wasn't a screwball, he wasn't a nut. He was a very popular guy. So when he gave it all up and went to India to find God, it was very interesting."

Burrows may not have been a screwball, but he certainly was considered a character during his twenty-year career at Rutgers. In the early 1960s, Burrows fit the pipe-smoking professor stereotype to a T. In 1965, in fact, he was singled out in a Rutgers publication as the typical college professor. In a now ironic article entitled "Teacher on a Treadmill," the Ph.D. from New York University was featured—in suit and tie, well-groomed hair, and wing-tip shoes—as a harried young intellectual eager to climb the

ladders of academia. As Rockland noted, there were no indications then that Burrows would later break from society, let alone join a cult. "David Burrows used to be editor of the *Rutgers Library Journal*, a foot-notey, stuffy thing," says Rockland. "I think he was as normal as anyone else."

Burrows earned his gold stars in the publish-or-perish world of university life with books on William Dean Howells and several anthologies of American literature. "He had done a fair amount of what you're supposed to do, but none of it was that distinguished. I think he was loved by the students but not by his peers. Popular professors are often resented by their peers," Rockland says.

Nonetheless, Burrows earned tenure as an associate professor and, by the late 1960s, left his wing-tip days behind. He became active in liberal causes and, as was the custom, began to dress the part. "He was never a hippie, but he was tilted in that direction," remembers Barrett Mandel, another colleague. Burrows furnished his office with floor cushions and "it began to look like a harem. He had sitar music going—and this was before Rajneesh," says Rockland.

By the time Burrows returned from his first sojourn to India, insisting he be called by his Hindi name, his fellow faculty members at Rutgers already thought of him as a risk-taker. Mandel, Burrows's closest friend in the English department, says, "He was at some level always a seeker. David was always interested in insight and enlightenment and Eastern points of view."

Still, most of his colleagues were not able to adjust to Burrows's latest experiment. Wearing orange clothing and a "mala" necklace (108 beads attached to a photo of

Rajneesh), Burrows continued teaching. "People were making fun of me—but not directly to my face—because I was walking around in my orange overalls and a necklace in New Brunswick," Burrows says.

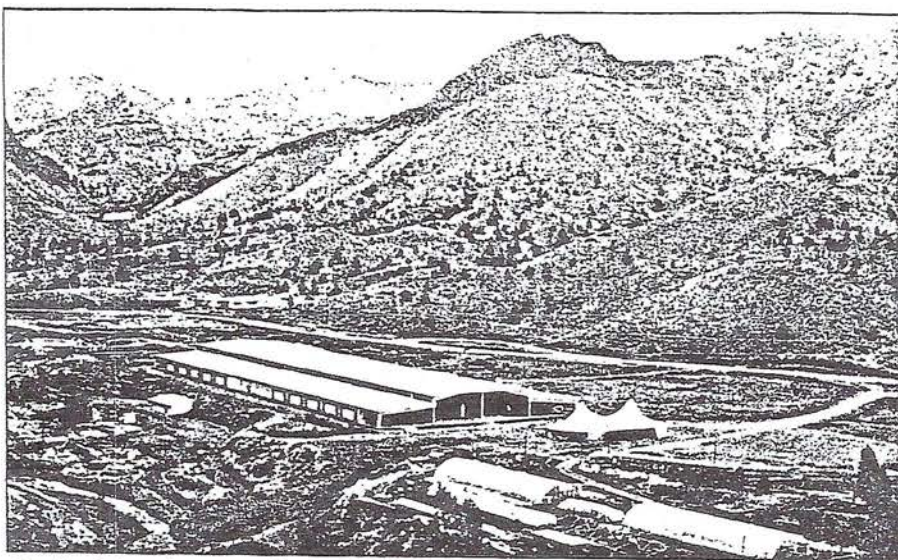
By 1980, middle-age doldrums had set in, and Burrows knew it was time to leave New Jersey for good. "I loved the actual teaching, but I didn't like the idea of doing it for another twenty years. I wanted a little adventure in my life."

More than that, Burrows recognized that his love of Rajneesh had deepened. "It wasn't what he was saying; it was just who he was," he explains. "Rajneeshism isn't a philosophy, and that's what I like about it. He's just an embodiment of beauty."

Rockland, who is teaching a course this spring called "Cults and Communes: The American Search for Utopia," believes Burrows's guru-like tendencies compelled him to fall at the feet of Rajneesh. "We all contain our opposites. I think the kind of person who wants to be a guru also wants to be a disciple."

Whatever the reasons, Burrows's decision to move to India and later to the Oregon commune meant that he would be leaving four children behind. He had long since separated from Sandra, his wife of some twenty years, "but that had nothing to do with Bhagwan," Mandel says. Although Sandra's family inheritance insured that the children would be taken care of financially, Burrows's departure devastated his two sons and two daughters. The youngest boy, Jamie, "felt he was deserted by his father," according to twenty-year-old Shawn McCormack, a Trenton resident who dated Jamie for several years.





*Rancho Rajneesh was a self-contained community with its own airfield, hotel, restaurant, beauty shop, and an auditorium, above, where the "Blessed One" delivered lectures.*

Professors at Rutgers who coveted tenured positions and had watched Burrows develop into a dynamic scholar were also dumbfounded by his decision to leave. "He wasn't just leaving any job, he was leaving a great job, a job he loved," Rockland says.

There were other consequences as well. The two new Peugeot automobiles would be left behind, and the annual trips to the summer home in France would be no more. "It was hard and scary, but I did it because it

was worth it," Burrows says.

**A** year after Burrows flew to India, Rajneesh abruptly moved to New Jersey, deserting the 2,500 followers who had gathered at his six-acre ashram. Although Burrows did not fit the glassy-eyed-and-shaved-head stereotype commonly associated with American cult members, he and his New Jersey counterparts were by no means oddities at Poona or later at the ranch

in Oregon.

Bhagwan's communes were top-heavy with brilliant women and wrinkle-browed thinking men, the kind of people whose names are followed by initials signifying academic distinction. While the New Jersey contingent of Rajneeshees had its share of typical cult fare—faddists, drifters, and impressionable college dropouts—the majority were in their 30s and early 40s, among them a psychotherapist, a political science professor, and various artists and writers.

While Burrows was in good company in Poona, it seemed pointless to stay after Bhagwan left. After a visit to Paris, he returned to Central Jersey with his second wife, a fellow Rajneeshee named Mahata.

Burrows waited in Princeton for word from Rajneesh's top aides, but they were busy tending to Bhagwan in Montclair. During the summer of 1981, the diabetic and hyper-allergic guru lived the pampered life in Kip's Castle, a four-story, Rhine-style mansion with stained-glass windows and thick stone walls that the Rajneeshees had purchased earlier that year. An unlikely place to retreat to, the suburban and somewhat conservative town was chosen by Rajneesh's former confidant and chief spokeswoman, Ma Anand Sheela, who had met him in Poona in 1973. A native of India, Sheela had moved to the Montclair area when she was seventeen and had briefly studied at Montclair State College. Later, in an interview given before leaving the Ore-

gon commune amid charges of attempted murder, arson, and wiretapping, she explained that Rajneesh was coaxed to New Jersey because "that was the place I knew, and I had taken responsibility for his health."

The 80-year-old Montclair castle served as a distribution center for Rajneesh books and tapes and as a temporary home for about 50 selected Rajneeshees. But local residents—who knew of Bhagwan's reputation as the "sex guru" of India—were never convinced that the fifteen-acre compound wouldn't be converted into a Playboy-like mansion for tofu lovers from all over the world.

"We told them, 'We're not going to take over Montclair, we're not going to take your kids off the street,'" remembers former castle resident Swami Shakyamuni, 41, whose name was Michael Cull when he worked in Trenton in the 1970s as a director of the state Department of Education. "We were very low key. We had no intention at all of establishing a big operation there."

While the Rajneeshees may have been low key, their orange clothing and passionate, open-air hugging didn't sit well with many of their neighbors. Slingshot-propelled ball bearings smashed through the windows of a storefront Rajneeshee office on more than one occasion, and a local housewife mounted a campaign to drive what she termed "the products of a sex-drug cult" out of town. The Rajneeshees began to look for a new home when troubles escalat-



*Every day, thousands of followers lined Zen Drive at the Oregon commune to chant and cheer as their spiritual leader slowly rolled by in one of his numerous Rolls-Royces.*

ed in Montclair. As Sheela would admit several years later, farms in Morris County and Flemington were considered as sites for an East Coast Rancho Rajneesh. "But we didn't find anything that was satisfying to carry out our project, which was to build an oasis in the desert," Sheela said.

By December 1981, Kip's Castle was for sale, and the Rajneeshees moved west. A 62,000-acre sheep and cattle ranch in eastern Oregon had gone on the market, and

the religious group's investment corporation paid \$5.7 million for the arid, mountainous spread. David Burrows would now be reunited with his leader.

After finding temporary work at one of Rajneesh's branch ashrams in Essex, Massachusetts, Burrows was recruited to move to Oregon. He and hundreds of other academicians and former professionals hauled the stones and plowed the fields of their newly acquired ranch with a religious fervor.



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"Because of the nature of his discourses and his background as a philosopher, Bhagwan's drawn a lot of people who have enjoyed the life of the mind. We're able to stimulate each other in much more meaningful ways than when we used to sit in Rutgers University and talk professor talk," says Burrows, who worked as one of the commune's bulldozer operators.

In four years, the Rajneeshes transformed what was once known as the Big Muddy Ranch into a self-sufficient agrarian community of vegetable fields, vineyards, and wooded lots. Supported by diverse investments and private donations—some from a group of Beverly Hills millionaires—followers of the "rich man's guru" also erected a shopping mall, an airstrip, a 145-room hotel, a 15,000-seat auditorium, and enough townhouses to accommodate their fluctuating population of 2,000 to 7,000.

Disciples like Burrows received a stipend of \$10, shelter, and three vegetarian meals a day for their seven-day-a-week labors. Their motivation, it was clear, was not monetary. "There's a great sense of Bhagwan's presence in day-to-day life here," Burrows says. Driving a taxicab, one of Burrows's later tasks, was always more of a psychic experience than a job. "It's not just getting behind the wheel. It's moving through space here."

As the commune developed, Bhagwan's influence on his "beloveds" became less and less subtle. At the Hotel Rajneesh, where private rooms rented for \$90 a day, there were no Gideon Bibles. The standard text in bedside tables was the *Darshan Diaries*, which describe "intimate dialogue between master and disciple." Residents of Rancho Rajneesh celebrated the coming of dawn and dusk by lining Zen Drive every day to bow and sing for Bhagwan as he drove by in one of his fleet of 93 Rolls-Royces. They discussed their master's ideas during communal meals and listened to his discourses on headphones. The Rajneeshes were avid shoppers in their local bookstore, where only one author's works were sold.

Despite the sect's deep-rooted love for Bhagwan and their desire to please and protect him, Rancho Rajneesh was surprisingly open to the press and to the curious. While armed guards patrolled the commune, estranged family members were encouraged to visit and could readily leave phone messages for their loved ones at the ranch's main switchboard. At the all-night visitors' center, spokeswomen and pleasant tour guides were always available. But phone calls and cordiality were little solace to parents who missed their children and feared Bhagwan's awesome powers of persuasion. One such parent was 50-year-old Sandra Burrows.

During the week of Christmas 1980, Sandra's oldest daughter, Dara, was home from Bennington College. Her father was already living in India and had invited his daughter

to visit him during a semester break her freshman year.

"I don't know if I really wanted her to go," Sandra remembers. "Her father gave her the money. It just kind of happened, kind of quietly without me being privy to the decision."

Weeks later, a postcard arrived in Millstone. "I'm not coming home. I'm happy and I've become a sannyasin," Dara wrote.

By the time the postcard reached Sandra, her soft-spoken eighteen-year-old daughter had already changed her name to Ma Prem Dara, was dressing in orange, and wore Bhagwan's picture around her neck.

"All through my childhood I thought I was the odd one because I felt on the outside, as if I was feeling more than anybody around me," Dara explains. "And then when I met Bhagwan he was just saying everything I was feeling all my life. It was like I could breathe and say, 'Oh, yeah, finally I'm not the one who is crazy.'"

Recently divorced from David, Sandra was ill-prepared to handle another family crisis. Since her oldest son, Mark, was away at college, Sandra banded together with her two youngest children, Jamie and Juliet, and together they tried to understand Dara's decision. "It was a terrible shock. I wanted her to go back to school, if not Bennington, then somewhere. But there was no way I was going to influence her," Sandra says.

Jamie, an upperclassman at Princeton Day School, was "unbelievably close" to his mother, especially in the early years when he lived at home, recalled former girlfriend Shawn McCormick. Although the two often argued, Shawn recalls, "Jamie sided completely with his mother. He thought what Dara and David had done was absurd."

Juliet, now a professional ballerina for a dance troupe in Amsterdam, was in her early teens when Dara left for India. "Juliet had a more mature relationship with her mother," Shawn says. "They weren't just Mom and daughter, they were friends. She stood up for Sandy...and would get really upset when she saw her mother getting upset."

As Juliet's dancing career got under way and Jamie dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania to live at home and attend Trenton State College, four years passed. The Burrowses began to resign themselves to the permanent loss of Dara and David. Then, in summer 1984, Jamie decided on a lark to visit his father and sister at Rancho Rajneesh, where they were both living. Suddenly 22-year-old Jamie, too, fell under the spell of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. He is now known as Swami Amand Brahma.

"We were all upset about losing Jamie, but we all dealt with it differently," Shawn remembers. "Sandy was emotional, weeping at the dining room table. Juliet just withdrew. I just kind of said it will be okay because he loves me. Each in his own way, we were trying not to lose him."

With Sandra's financial backing and blessing, Shawn visited Jamie at the commune and pleaded with him to come home. She returned a month later, empty-handed. After

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several months at Rancho Rajneesh, Jamie did return to Millstone for a visit. But something inside him had changed. "Jamie intimidated Sandy into giving him money [for plane fare]," Shawn recalls. "The most important thing was getting back to the commune. And if it took walking all over me or Sandy or anyone else, he'd do it. He was so cruel and nasty he'd reduce Sandy to tears."

After relenting and giving her son money to return, Sandra frequently telephoned Jamie and Dara. In desperation, she consulted a cult psychologist for advice on how to persuade Jamie to leave. "I didn't know what I could do. He's not a child. He hasn't been kidnapped, and I wouldn't do anything to violate his rights."

The bond to Bhagwan proved impossible to break. Dara once told Sandra, "It's just an accident you're my mother. It means nothing. I have a family now, and you're not my family." Jamie, whom his mother once described as "a very questioning person," also adopted the company line. "I haven't heard Bhagwan say to drop your past," he told her. "But for me it feels all right to drop my past."

Despite the Disney-like smiles that greeted visitors, Rancho Rajneesh was no haven of traditional family values. Bhagwan's teachings and peer pressure from other commune members dissuaded many Rajneeshes from ever meaningfully reuniting with their relatives. As Sandra Burrows learned, "Bhagwan assures them that the way to true happiness is to become a new person and to throw your lot with him. You can read it in one of his books: 'Drop your past life, it represents nothing but unhappiness.' But what is your past life if it isn't your parents?"

Although Rancho Rajneesh folded last year, Jamie and Dara Burrows are as committed to Rajneesh as ever. But Sandra refuses to give up hope. "I have to believe there will come a time when Dara and Jamie will start to question their decision," she says. "I have to believe that because otherwise it makes me too sad to think of it always being this way."

Like their commune soulmates, David, Dara, and Jamie Burrows stuck by Rajneesh through his troubled times. Employing a cadre of legal aides, the Rancho Rajneeshes staved off court challenges to their town's incorporation, environmental policies, and questionable church-state relationship. When the outside world mocked Bhagwan's AIDS-inspired ban on kissing and questioned his motives in busing thousands of street people to the commune just before an important local election, the Rajneeshes rallied together in support of their man. Last September, the ultimate affirmation of faith took place.

Two days after a spirited farewell celebration at the private Rajneesh Airport,



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Bhagwan announced to the world that his close associate, Ma Anand Sheela, had flown to Europe. Rajneesh alleged that while her underlings washed commune dishes and scrubbed commune toilets, the pistol-packing Sheela had been bugging bedrooms and poisoning allies of Bhagwan to further her own ambitions. To the dismay of commune residents, voice-activated tape recorders were discovered inside hollowed-out books hidden in Bhagwan's private chambers. Escape tunnels and secret laboratories were found near Sheela's home. The inner workings of a supposedly loving and crime-free community had been exposed.

The news discouraged the Burrowses, but it didn't cause them to lose faith. In a rare moment of candor, David Burrows admitted that the commune was hardly as idyllic as purported. "There was a certain image we all really knew we had to present. Dissension was not popular." Sheela and many of the commune officials had been "repressive in their powers and pretended they had the direct word from Bhagwan. They imposed their will on the commune their way. I feel a lot of shame—not because of what the outside world will think but that I didn't revolt, that I was a sheep. I trusted what I was told, not what were my gut instincts."

Despite all the soul searching, the commune leader was spared any criticism. "I wish somehow Bhagwan would have been more aware and accessible," says Burrows. "But I don't blame him."

As the investigation into Sheela's alleged wrongdoings progressed, Bhagwan faced troubles of his own and was arrested last October on charges of immigration fraud and arranging sham marriages. Rajneesh traded his floor-length, silver-striped robe for prison greens and spent the next few weeks sipping coffee on a metal cot. After pleading guilty to the immigration charge and paying a \$400,000 fine, he departed for the mountains of India. He told his disciples not to follow him and he vowed never to return to the United States.

Alone for the first time since 1981, the residents of Rancho Rajneesh packed their bags as well. As scores of Rolls-Royces were loaded onto carriers to be auctioned off in Texas, the Rajneeshes began planning their uncertain futures. Some returned to family and friends. Several headed off to write their Rancho Rajneesh memoirs. Others, like Dara and Jamie Burrows, rented homes in the Portland area with fellow disciples and began looking for odd jobs.

Their father had other plans. Longing to "live a simple life and do some meditating," he departed for Nepal. "It's in the Himalayas," David Burrows said, "not that far from where Bhagwan is." ■

*Jim Popkin has written about Rancho Rajneesh as a reporter for the Times of Trenton. He is currently on leave from the newspaper, studying law at Yale Law School.*

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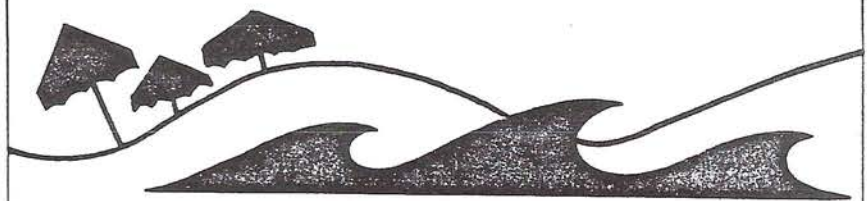
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