

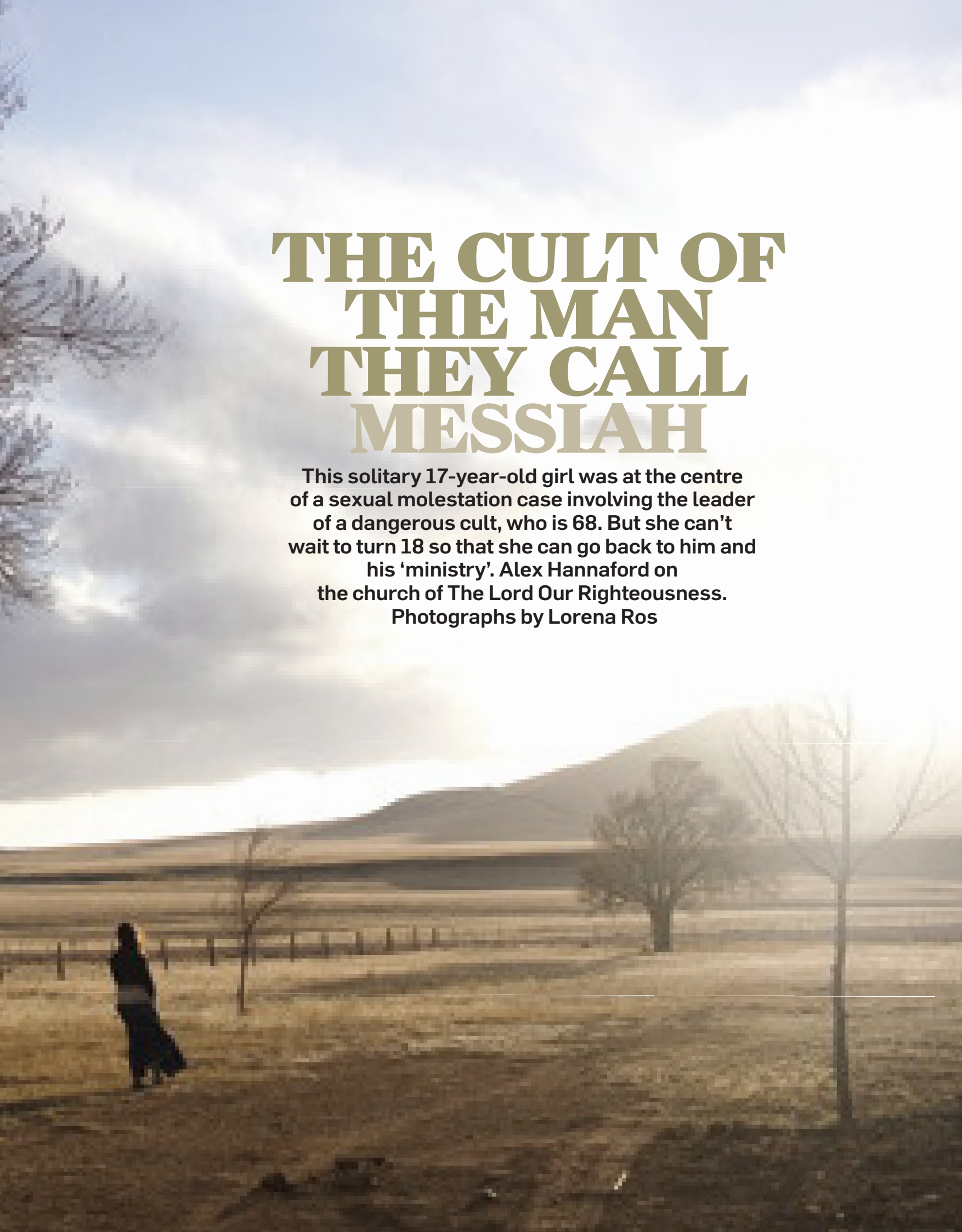
Crime *New Mexico cult*

Lakeisha Sayer, known
as Healed, at the ranch
where she now lives



THE CULT OF THE MAN THEY CALL MESSIAH

This solitary 17-year-old girl was at the centre of a sexual molestation case involving the leader of a dangerous cult, who is 68. But she can't wait to turn 18 so that she can go back to him and his 'ministry'. Alex Hannaford on the church of The Lord Our Righteousness. Photographs by Lorena Ros



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here's a sign at the city limits to the small town of Clayton, New Mexico, that reads "Do not pickup hitchhikers in this area: Northeast New Mexico Detention Facility". The truth is, they wouldn't get very far in this remote part of the United States without a lift.

Bored high-school kids gather outside one of the town's three gas stations — the one that serves sandwiches and stays open late — and when they graduate, it's tradition to paint graffiti on rocks at the top of the cliff overlooking Highway 370. Near the intersection, there's a nondescript mobile home set 50ft back from the main road. You wouldn't give it a second glance, but this small trailer, with tumbleweeds blowing across its yard, is home to a couple at the heart of a drama that has played out over the past nine years here. It involves a religious sect, its 68-year-old leader who claims to be the Messiah, accusations of brainwashing and planned mass suicide and, most recently, child molestation.

John and Elsa Sayer were members of The Lord Our Righteousness (LOR) church, an apocalyptic cult that arrived in Clayton in 2000 and settled 40 miles north of town on a few thousand acres of ranch land they called Strong City. But in 2007, having spent 16 years in the group, the Sayers left suddenly after discovering that their two underage daughters, Lakeisha and Ashleey, had "laid naked" with its ageing leader, Wayne Bent, in what he said was an act of "healing".

By all accounts, Bent's arrest was fairly dramatic, considering LOR says it doesn't possess weapons. A police helicopter hovered over Strong City while armed officers cut the lock on the gate to gain entry. Last May, a grand jury indicted Bent on charges of criminal sexual contact with, and contributing to the delinquency of, a minor, and in December he was sentenced to 18 years. In January this year, one of his young followers almost died after fasting for 30 days in protest.

John and Elsa Sayer say their family has been torn apart by the LOR church. While they and their eldest daughter, Ashleey, have left, their youngest, Lakeisha, is still a member, estranged from her parents and determined to return to Strong City when she turns 18 this August. She also says she's in love with Michael Travesser, the name by which Wayne Bent is known to his followers.

Elsa Sayer is a pretty woman in her mid-thirties with long, dark brown hair. She was just 16 when she married John, two and a half years her senior. Today they both work at a local motel, she as a receptionist, he as the caretaker. John's mother, Shirley, who now goes by the name Aliah, joined the church in 1989, and John and Elsa followed shortly after.

Bent was a pastor with the Seventh Day Adventist Church in California before leaving to form his own denomination in the mid-1980s. LOR became more and more detached from the outside world and in 1990 settled on a 320-acre parcel of land in Idaho. Ten years later, Bent received a "message" that the group should relocate to New Mexico.

In the beginning, Elsa says everybody was like family. There was talk of putting all the money into one pot so that they could live communally. They collected rainwater and dug their own sewage system. They grew their own vegetables and the children were home-schooled. But the Sayers say things changed fairly quickly. Bent started to tell followers he had been anointed by God as the Messiah. Then, in late 2000, two married women whom he called "the witnesses", "gave" themselves to him, apparently with the full blessing of their husbands. Bent told the group this was a test of their faith.



"It took me a month before I realised he was saying he was literally the Second Coming of Christ," Elsa says. "I couldn't accept it at first. But what really got to me was when he slept with the two witnesses. I couldn't see how it was right or godly."

Over the years, Elsa says most of the marriages between Bent's followers fell apart because they were told they were only supposed to be married to God. But she refused to give up her own. Then came the incident that, for the Sayers, was the final straw. Elsa says Ashleey took part in a "prophecy" that involved seven virgins laying naked with Bent on a bed. Two of them were Lakeisha and Ashleey, then 14 and 16. Another was a girl called Willow who was just 12. Bent says this was spiritual healing and he had told his followers before it took place; the state said it was sexual molestation.

At the time, Elsa and John had moved off the property to find work in Clayton, but they were still active members of the church. They didn't want their daughters to play any part in the ritual. "I told him [Bent] I had prayed hard and it was not on my heart for my girls to sleep with him," Elsa says. "But he said it was because I was demonic, that if I was godly I could have given it up. John and I refused and threw a major wrench in his plans." But Lakeisha and Ashleey did it anyway. "They went behind our backs," Elsa says.

John says he felt angry but he knew Bent would pay the price. "I didn't have to blow his head off. God would do it his way. It sounds like I didn't care, but that's not it."

John's mother, Shirley, and his sister, Misty (known as Liberty), still live at Strong City. He hasn't spoken to either for eight months. Today, Ashleey is 18 and lives in Oklahoma with her boyfriend, Sean. She works at a branch of Subway and is trying to finish high school. She hardly speaks to her

Above: Wayne Bent in prison in Los Lunas. His sentence was 18 years

Top left: Willow, 13 (left), and Lakeisha, 17. Both have lain naked with Bent for 'healing'

Above left: John and Elsa Sayer, Lakeisha's parents



younger sister any more, which Elsa says has been one of the hardest things for her. The pair were inseparable. Lakeisha was put into foster care, though eventually John and Elsa regained custody. Desperate to return to her “family” at Strong City, Lakeisha fasted for 10 days. She was hospitalised and fed with an IV drip until she agreed to eat. She now lives in a ranch house a few miles from Clayton, looking after an old woman with dementia. She’s been away from Strong City almost a year, but still goes by her “spiritual” name, Healed, and is still devoted to the old man she calls Michael.

“It’s like trying to stop a drunk from drinking,” John says. “They’re not going to quit unless they want to. We call her

every week but she doesn’t like talking to us much. Basically we’re going to hell and she’s going to heaven, and that’s pretty much how it is as far as she’s concerned.”

“And we raised her in that,” Elsa says. “It’s kind of our fault. She fell in love with Michael. He’s her first love. And that’s darn hard to break. No one has charisma like him.”

That evening, John and Elsa invite me to their trailer. John switches on a disco light. Elsa chooses rock music from the library on her computer and pours us drinks while the blue and red strobes dance around the room. They’re a fun couple, like teenagers who have just discovered a world of alcohol and partying. They’re reliving the youth they never had.

I drive to meet Lakeisha, who says she is in love with the spirit inside Wayne Bent. The wind is howling around the smallholding where she’s staying. Slim, an old cowboy, greets us as we pull up the dirt track. There’s a greenhouse, a couple of shed buildings, the cottage where Lakeisha is staying, and breathtaking views across the prairie.

Lakeisha is a beautiful girl. She has long dark hair like her mother and, like all the women who belong to LOR, she dresses modestly in a long denim skirt. “I like being here,” she says, “but I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for people’s prejudices toward my relationship with Michael. None of these things would have happened”.

She was cleaning greens in the sink of her trailer the day she was forcibly removed from Strong City by the state’s Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) in April 2008. “The hardest thing was they wouldn’t let me hug Michael before I left. I just broke down and started crying.” I ask if she understands why she was taken away and charges were brought against Bent. “It seems like the public is really against us and wants to disrupt our lives,” she says. “I think they were sticking their noses into something that wasn’t their business. It’s like, ‘Can’t you guys go do something else? There’s not a problem. Go investigate a real crime. I’m not being abused, I told you a thousand times’.”

I discover Lakeisha had also asked Bent to have sex with her, or — to use the term the LOR likes to use — “consummation”. “Yes,” she says. “But what does this have to do with anything?” I explain that if that had taken place, Bent would have faced far worse charges. “If it was God’s will for me, it would have happened. It wouldn’t have mattered what the consequences would have been. But God never opened it up. He never directed Michael or I. He didn’t connect us.”

Bent was found guilty of the charge involving Lakeisha. Donald Gallegos, the district attorney, believes this was because of her emotional bond with Bent. Although she was upfront about what happened, she was in love with him. But he says the state maintains it had enough evidence to convict Bent of touching either Lakeisha or Ashlee on their

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breasts. By Bent’s own testimony, he laid down “chest to chest” with Lakeisha and placed his hand on Ashlee’s sternum. “It was Ashlee’s testimony that he had also kissed her on the breast. Our argument all along was that the minute these girls walked in and took their clothes off, he had a duty as an adult to say no, this is improper, and he never did that. And the jury obviously agreed with us.” The third girl was 13-year-old Victoria Thompson, ➤



known as Willow. I had met her briefly in 2004 while she played outside her father, Jonathan's, trailer, when I had gone to investigate claims that Bent had taken two women from their husbands and had sex with them and that the group was contemplating suicide.

"I felt like God was asking me to go to Michael and ask him for this," Willow explains. "I wrote him an e-mail telling him I wanted to take my clothes off and have him hold me. When I got there I was nervous, so he said he'd hold me with my clothes on. Then I asked him if I could take my clothes off and he said yes. When I was being born, I was stuck in the birth canal, so he told me to imagine I was being reborn. He put his hand on my collarbone. He then asked me where I carried my stress, so he put his hand on my stomach."

I ask Jonathan how, as a father, he could allow this to happen. "I respect God's voice to my daughter and I trust it," he says. "I've also known Michael for 21 years and I trust him. It was definitely unconventional, but Jesus Christ was very unconventional in every sense."

Gallegos says the case involving Willow was dropped, not for lack of evidence, but because of her hesitation or unwillingness to participate.

When I pull up at the gates to Strong City, it's eerily silent. Bent's son Jeff comes out of his mobile home to greet me and we wander down the hill together. LOR has sold off most of the land, but still has a couple of hundred acres. It's beautiful, full of pine, juniper and scrub oak, but you get the overwhelming feeling that something is missing. When I was here last, Strong City was a thriving community. There's a sign in their church that reads "Welcome Home Children", but there are no children any more. The soil is dry and the wind howls through the valley. "We're not self-sufficient any more," Jeff tells me. "Life here is over."

Jeff gets daily phone calls from his father, which he records and uploads to a password-protected website: Bent's message still reaches his followers. We sit on a rock in the shade, and Jeff tells me that his father was convicted on prejudices rather than facts. "Even if he did commit the crime he was convicted of, his sentence was very disproportionate when compared to the average sentence given out to most other

Right: a view of the compound at Strong City, New Mexico. Some 55 members of The Lord Our Righteousness sect live there or nearby

Above: the Barn, or church, at Strong City. There are no longer any children, and since Bent was imprisoned, his chair is empty



Above: Aquinnah O'Keefe, 25, known as Esther, fasted for 32 days in protest when Bent was sentenced. The authorities stepped in to remove her

Right: Beth Travesser, another of Bent's young followers who is waiting for his release

offenders in the state for the same thing or even greater crimes." Last year, Jeff says, a teacher pleaded guilty to having sexual intercourse with a 16-year-old student and received 10 months' work release [staying in prison at night].

He doesn't think his father will survive in prison, that his "sensitive, loving nature" will die. Jeff sees what happened as the work of God. "We're willing to be the offscouring of the Earth if we can have God's approval," he says. "There's nothing worse than a cult that allegedly abuses children. We've been given that scarlet letter and we're going to bear it. I wouldn't call it a persecution. I'd call it a crucifixion."

The next morning, I drive 300 miles to Los Lunas, home to the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility where Bent is imprisoned, as I've been granted an interview. On the way, I stop off at a house where Aquinnah O'Keefe, a 25-year-old follower known as Esther, is staying so as to be closer to Bent. After his sentencing, Esther fasted in protest. She insists the core issue is religious freedom. I ask whether she would have continued until death. "I would," she says, "if that's what I had been told to do. But I wasn't told to do that."

In 1982 the FBI estimated there were over 3,000 cults in the US. Before her death in 2003, Dr Margaret Singer, an expert in sects, reckoned the number had risen to about 5,000. According to Rick Ross, who has spent 27 years investigating cults, LOR is one of the most dangerous. "This is a very



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extreme group, certainly one of the most dangerous in the United States right now,” he says. “The level of control is very, very high. You can see that from their willingness to die.

“This young woman [Esther] was within 72 hours of a coma. This is a group that can stand by and watch as a human being wastes away, dying day by day, and do nothing — including her own mother. That’s how brainwashed they are. And given this basis, anything can happen. If Wayne Bent wanted them to kill themselves, they would kill themselves.”

Ross says Esther’s fast was only broken when she was removed from the compound — a point at which he believes she was forced to think for herself. “The thing that upsets me,” he adds, “is that the New Mexico authorities allow it to go on. He [Bent] repeatedly calls the group and instructs them what to do. He still has control over the compound. If they cut those communication lines, the group might disintegrate.”

Bent cuts a frail figure as he is brought in to the tiny interview room in the prison. He stoops to pick up a comb that falls out of his pocket before taking a seat. He isn’t handcuffed, but a guard stands at the door throughout our inter-

view. He was moved to the geriatric wing recently for his own protection, and when he’s not in his cell he works in the garden and sweeping up.

Bent has never denied laying next to a naked underage girl. In fact, he admits he did this with three minors up at Strong City, but he says those were healing experiences, that he did not touch any of their “sexual parts” and that he should not, therefore, have been convicted.

“She asked if she could lay down naked, and I thought it over and I realised she wanted to pour her heart out without the visual restrictions of clothing, so I agreed. I put my hand on her sternum and I prayed for her while she was telling me her woes. When she was finished, I told her to get dressed and leave. And I was sentenced to 10 years for that. [Bent was sentenced to 18 years, eight of them suspended.]”

I ask whether he ever asked God if he should “consume” with Lakeisha Sayer. “Yes, but it was no,” he says. “I wasn’t led to do that. When I first heard that request, I was deeply shocked and I shared it with the church too. It really wiped me out. Sometimes God puts things on people’s hearts for another reason than what it looks like.”

I tell Bent his son doesn’t think he’ll last in prison. Tears well up in his eyes. “I don’t have the heart for it,” he says after some moments. “I think I would just die of a broken heart.”

What will his followers do without him? “Some might die with me,” he says. “If people were so connected with me, and I died of a broken heart, there may be some who would die of a broken heart also.”

On the way out of the prison, I ask one of the officials why Bent is allowed to make as many phone calls as he does, all of which are relayed to his followers. “The free speech laws in this country are very powerful,” he tells me.

Before I leave New Mexico, I stop off at the Albuquerque offices of Bent’s attorney, John McCall, who is appealing against the conviction. A friendly man with a long grey hair ponytail, he says his client never touched Ashleely’s breast

and that his actions were of a “healing nature”. “We have a huge porno industry in this country that encourages young girls and women to disrobe for money and fame,” he says. “Yet, when we look at the girls from Strong City, don’t we need to stop a moment and examine the depth of what the experience is doing for their long-term development?”

Members of LOR insist no brainwashing has taken place and that people are free to leave any time. “It’s not conditioning. It’s faith,” Jeff told me. “And Lakeisha has been persecuted relentlessly by her parents for this.”

John and Elsa have decided to stay in Clayton, at least for now, to be closer to their daughters. “In a way I’d like to move,” John says. “But at least we can be happy now.”

It’s true — the people up at Strong City are physically free to walk out of those metal gates at the bottom of the ranch. Some live nearby and go to the shops when they want. Even Lakeisha says she may stay on at Slim’s ranch, caring for the old woman. But mentally, I don’t think any of them are free at all, because they are all utterly in thrall to one man: Wayne Bent, the person they call Messiah ■