

MD's son describes life with Krishnas

"The routine was the same most days. We were awakened at 3:30 a.m. for cold showers. The next five hours were spent attending religious services and classes and chanting, singing, and praying. At 9 a.m., we'd have breakfast, usually a paper plate full of rice, bread, vegetable, and a sweet. We'd spend the next 12 hours — with a break for lunch and dinner — walking the streets to solicit money. When we got home at 9 or 10 p.m., we'd be ready to drop."

Ed Shapiro, the 26-year-old son of Boston family physician Eli Shapiro, MD, is describing a typical day in his life as a member of the Hare Krishna cult.

Last month, after seven years living in a Boston Hare Krishna commune, Ed packed his few belongings and left the group. Now, he says, "I want to get to the truth of the whole situation and tell people what I experienced. It's not all it's cracked up to be."

IN AN INTERVIEW with *American Medical News*, Ed discussed his experiences with the group. "I started going to Krishna meetings in high school but I didn't join full-time until my first year in college. I dropped out of Brandeis U. to become a full-time solicitor for the Hare Krishnas.

"Most of the time I lived in a Boston house with 30 or 40 others. I spent almost the entire seven years going to different towns in Massachusetts to raise money. Most mornings we'd be driven in vans to a town and given certain blocks to cover.

"I got to be pretty good at sizing people up, deciding what approach to take so that they'd give me money. Several years

they'd donate.

"So I decided to pose as a deaf mute and sell miniature American flags. I found that walking up and down the aisles in grocery stores was very effective . . . I'd be out of the store before the manager even noticed. Another successful trick was to approach a salesman speaking with customers in a store . . . he'd give me money just to be rid of me.

"ALTHOUGH I was proud of my ability to raise funds successfully, I also became increasingly disillusioned that the group was not living up to its promises. When I joined the group, I was attracted by their principle that 'real happiness in life is trying to help other people.' But I'm not sure who the Krishnas were really trying to help.

"One of my long-standing dissatisfactions with the group was their rule that single men must remain celibate. So several years ago I asked the president of the Boston Hare Krishna house to find a wife for me. He selected another woman who lived in the house and we were allowed to talk for a few minutes each day for a month to determine whether we'd get along. I was so brainwashed at the time that I didn't realize how absurd this all was.

"Since there didn't seem to be any alternative, we decided to marry. But my life didn't really change much after the marriage, since husband and wife must remain in their separate dormitories. The Krishna rule is that sexual intercourse is allowed once a month for half an hour, to be preceded by five hours of chanting.

"The attitude of some of the leaders



Photos: Sari Slaver/AMN

Ed came to me during my court battle to gain control over my trust fund. Immediately after I turned my money over to the group, my wife just stopped talking to me and moved down to a Krishna farm in West Virginia.

"I'M NOT SURE, maybe that was the last straw. Once I decided to move out, the others in the group seemed almost relieved to be getting rid of a dissenter.

"I found an apartment that I share with another former Krishna member and I've got a good job in the unit management department at Boston U. Hospital. I'm sorry I didn't leave the group sooner but it really was hard for me to admit how wrong I had been all along. At least I've got my freedom back now and I'm not a slave any more," he says.

Adds father Eli Shapiro, MD: "Of course, our family is thrilled that Eddie has come out of this experience and is the same loving, concerned individual that we knew before. Over the years, I've gotten letters from hundreds of other parents whose children have joined one of these cults. The sadness and the an-

Eli Shapiro, MD, with his son Ed. Ed spent seven years as a Hare Krishna, sometimes posing as a deaf mute to sell American flags, before he quit the group.