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COURTS: Ananda church founder takes the stand

Swami defends himself against allegations of sexual misconduct

by Vicky Anning

The founder of the Ananda Church of Self-Realization in Palo Alto, J. Donald Walters, took the stand this week in San Mateo County Superior Court to defend himself against allegations of sexual harassment and fraud.

The civil suit, filed by former Ananda employee Anne-Marie Bertolucci of Palo Alto, alleges that Walters--known to his followers as Swami Kriyananda--abused his authority as a spiritual leader to make improper sexual advances toward her. Since Bertolucci filed her sexual harassment suit, at least four other women, all former Ananda members, have sworn in court documents that Walters fondled them or sought sexual favors, often beginning with a request for a back rub or a foot massage. Two women have claimed that the massages culminated in sexual intercourse.

Bertolucci, who left the Palo Alto church in late 1993, is suing Ananda, Walters and Ananda church minister, Danny Levin, claiming sexual harassment, wrongful discharge and fraud, among other charges. She is seeking more than \$1 million in damages.

Walters, 71, has admitted in court that he struggled with the celibacy vows that are expected of a "swami," the Hindu equivalent of a monk. But he said that he did not abuse his spiritual authority to have sex.

"I never inflicted, I never imposed," he said in court testimony Wednesday. "I asked them if it was OK. They were exuberant participants for all those reasons." Walters claimed that some of the witnesses in the case, including (name deleted),

"thrust their company" upon him when he wanted to be alone, and interrupted his meditations to take advantage of his "weaknesses" after his wife, Kimberly Moore, left him in 1985.

Bertolucci, who was 28 when she joined Palo Alto's Ananda church in 1991, claims that she was asked to massage Walters in 1993 and watch a video with an "erotic sex scene."

Another woman wrote in a court declaration: "While we were together he would tell me to 'tune into his consciousness,' meaning I should take advantage of my close contact with him and the spiritual benefits gained as a devotee."

Walters declined to talk about the case after his court appearance. But when the Weekly interviewed Walters as part of a Feb. 28, 1996 cover story on the charges and the Ananda church, he called the charges "lies."

"Anyone in my position is going to get that kind of thing thrown at him, and I figure I might as well not lose any sleep over it," he said in that story. "Am I commenting on whether (Bertolucci's claim) is true? It's a lie."

Walters filed a counter suit against Bertolucci claiming defamation of character. However, Walter's suit was dropped the day before the trial began last month, according to the plaintiff's attorney, Michael Flynn.

In a bizarre twist, Flynn discovered days before the trial began that Ananda's attorneys had hired a private investigator to rifle through his garbage in San Diego to obtain documents discussing witnesses and strategies in the case, according to Ford Greene, a Marin County lawyer working on Bertolucci's case.

In light of this development, Flynn requested that presiding Judge Lawrence T. Stevens, enter a default judgment in the plaintiff's favor. But Stevens instead reportedly barred the defense from cross-examining Bertolucci or either of the two women who claimed that Walters had had sex with them.

Walters claimed that the lawsuit is being secretly funded by his former church, the Self-Realization Fellowship, which is based in Los Angeles. Walters left that church in 1962 and founded the Ananda World Brotherhood Village--a 72-acre commune--in Nevada City in 1968, along with six other followers. Bertolucci's attorneys deny that

the Self-Realization Fellowship is financing the suit and said that the plaintiff is paying the costs herself.

As well as the Nevada City commune, Ananda has six other communities in the United States, Australia and Italy, including one in Palo Alto. In 1994, Ananda bought the former St. Aloysius Church at 2171 El Camino Real in Palo Alto for \$2.14 million and has expanded its membership in Palo Alto from 100 to more than 200.

The church, which boasts thousands of members worldwide, also owns and operates The East-West Bookshop at 324 Castro St. in Mountain View and Ananda Community at 240 Monroe Drive in Mountain View, a 5-acre apartment complex with its own meditation room and swimming pool.

Walters, who was born in Romania of American parents and who studied literature at Brown University, has written more than 70 books and also produces music CDs. The church also has its own publishing house, Crystal Clarity Publishing. The plaintiff's attorneys allege that the publishing house racked up hundreds of thousands of dollars of debts selling Walters' books. However, Walters testified Wednesday that he was paying back this debt by "the sweat of my brow," by giving lectures, writing more books and producing more records.

The trial, which has been going on since October, is expected to continue until at least Dec. 18. It will be up to the 14-member jury, eight of whom are women, to determine the damages Walters and Ananda should pay to Bertolucci.