

# One man's view of Yisrayl Hawkins' world

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**By RICHARD HORN & LORETTA FULTON**

David Richardson tries to explain through tears and jitters brought on by fear, lack of sleep and the need for a smoke why he joined the House of Yahweh and why he has now gone broke trying desperately to get his family out.

"There is an emptiness inside of everyone that you're trying to fill," Richardson said. "I thought I was going to meet the Almighty anointed on Earth."

Instead, he met Yisrayl Hawkins. The former Abilene policeman known then as Buffalo Bill Hawkins started his own, Old Testament-based religious sect headquartered in Abilene and Callahan County back in 1980.

Since then he has attracted followers from across the country, a number of whom are here this week to observe the Passover. The sect is now attracting state and even national media attention for continued reports of polygamy, allegations of fraud and Hawkins' association with members of extreme anti-government groups. At first attracted by Hawkins' proclamations, Richardson said he later began to doubt and question prophecies he saw proved false. And then he wanted out as badly as he's ever wanted anything, he said.

"I was stupid," he said. "I can't believe I fell for it. You have no idea what this man can do."

Hawkins has not responded to repeated requests for interviews from the Reporter-News and other media. Followers who are contacted issue a blanket denial of all allegations. 'GOT THEM OUT OF THERE' Richardson, 38, came to Texas from Maryland over two weeks ago to try to extract his family from the sect's compound near Eula.

He was successful in getting two sons, ages 12 and 6 removed, he said.

"I went on the grounds and put them in the car and just got them out of there," he said. He claimed one elder tried to block his quick departure and hid his face when Richardson tried to take his picture to show authorities.

He hasn't been as successful with his 14-year-old daughter or his wife, Bonnie, who on March 1 legally changed her name to Biynyah Hawkins to match that of the sect's leader. More than 100 followers have made similar name changes in past months.

Since he began his quest, Richardson said he has spent most of his money, has been threatened by someone who told him he'd been hired to "take me out" and is moving from one place to another out of fear. He has made contact with law enforcement officials, child welfare caseworkers, lawyers and anyone else he thinks might help, he said.

Richardson, who said he was ex-communicated just this week in a ceremony videotaped by sect members, isn't alone in falling into disillusionment with the House of Yahweh and its founder. He has been in contact with another ex-communicant, Darin Jeffries, who has set up a refugee camp for others who want out.

"We want people to know there is a life after the House of Yahweh," Jeffries said. "I'm not going out there and trying to get people out, but I would sure help them out if I could." JOINED IN 1991

David Richardson's story is similar to that related by others. A middle-class family living in Salisbury, Md., the

Richardsons were members of Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God, the same church Yisrayl Hawkins adhered to before starting his own faith with his brother, Jacob.

Among their beliefs is keeping Saturday holy. Apparently, the family's name got on a mailing list of people who worship on Saturdays, Richardson said.

Two people from the House of Yahweh traveled to Maryland to meet with the family, he said. Eventually, the Richardson family counted themselves among the House of Yahweh faithful, and in 1991 they began making yearly pilgrimages to Abilene for the three Feast Days observed by the sect.

But then things turned ugly, Richardson said. His wife started living with an older member of the sect. A year ago she left Richardson and moved, along with the three children, into the compound. She works for \$35 a week in a print shop operated by the House of Yahweh and is required, as all members are, to give three tithes of 10 percent each to Hawkins, Richardson said. When he was a member, Richardson said he himself had given the House of Yahweh thousands of dollars of his own money through tithes.

"He keeps you in poverty so he can control you," he said.

Before Richardson got out, at Hawkins's urging he applied for and got Aid to Families With Dependent Children and a Lone Star Card, which replaced food stamps in Texas.

In return for that advice, Hawkins got a 30 percent tithe, Richardson said. Although he is unemployed, Richardson said he will soon leave the state, relinquish his welfare benefits and find another job as a salesman. Worse even than turning over money to Hawkins, Richardson said, is that people get caught up in his teachings and are manipulated by him. As for himself, Richardson said he "woke up" and began to see how Hawkins was misusing scriptures.

Richardson is fearful of what might happen to those remaining under Hawkins' hand. "They think he is the anointed one," he said. "They would kill themselves if he said to."

As for his own spirituality, Richardson said he still maintains his original beliefs: "I believe in the name of our Father. Our Creator is Yahweh, but he is not here."

Looking around the motel room, shaking as he tries to light a cigarette, he said, "I'm living like a vagabond, and I haven't done anything wrong. All I want is my family."