

Astrology Schools Seek—And Get—Academic Recognition

Accreditation Commission Approves Astrology School

KEVIN CHRISTOPHER

The Astrological Institute in Scottsdale, Arizona, received its new nationwide accreditation from the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACC-SCT) in September 2001—an apparent first in astrology.

The Astrological Institute offers full degrees in this ancient Babylonian art of divination, which is based on the premise that the positions of stars and planets affect people's personalities and fates. Belief in the practice persists despite the lack of any reliable scientific evidence that it actually works, according to Andrew Fraknoi, a CSICOP fellow and chair of the astronomy department at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California. "Although astrologers like to pretend such evidence does exist," says Fraknoi, "astrology has in fact been tested in dozens of excellent scientific trials, and it has consistently failed them. There's simply no evidence that astrology works—that it predicts anything or categorizes people in any way that can be used to help them."

Commenting on the Astrological Institute's accreditation in a recent Associated Press story, Judith Eaton, who heads the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in Washington, D.C., said that the accreditation does not validate astrology, but only recognizes that the school fulfills its promises to students.

Scientists like Fraknoi dispute Eaton's distinction between the validity of the subject taught and quality of service to students. "Accrediting a school for a technique which has no demonstrable basis in fact seems to be the very opposite of what accreditation should be about. The notion that accreditation

only recognizes that the school fulfills what it promises its students' is patently absurd. If a school were to promise that it would teach techniques for flying by leaping off cliffs with no equipment, I doubt any accrediting agency would rush to give them official sanctions. There should be similar hesitation about

accrediting a school of astrology, which cannot demonstrate the reality or efficacy of what it teaches."

In an August 28, 2001, interview with

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Astrology in Seattle: Kepler College Looks to the Stars, But It Is Not Accredited

MARK G. KUZIK

The Higher Education Coordinating (HEC) Board of the state of Washington issued on March 9, 2000, a Certificate of Authorization to Kepler College of Astrological Arts and Sciences—located in Lynnwood, Washington, just outside of Seattle—to offer degree programs in Bachelor of Arts in Astrological Studies, Master of Arts in Astrological Counseling, and Masters of Arts in Astrological Studies.

"The founding of the college will lead to heightened public respect and expectations of what astrology is capable of providing to the full spectrum of society," Enid Newberg, president of the new college, said in a news release when the state authorization was finally granted.

According to Newberg, thirty-one students enrolled in July 2000 for Kepler's first term of all-Web-based classes—about half the number Kepler expected, according to its application to the HEC Board. Their ages ranged from seventeen to seventy-one and were geographically spread throughout the United States and other countries. Kepler's third term, which ended in the summer of 2001, began with twenty students. Newberg says thirteen new students and eighteen returning students are attending next academic year, about one quarter of the 119 students expected by Kepler's Board. Newberg expects

enrollments to increase once the masters program gets underway.

The first year BA curriculum starts with courses in the history of astrology, such as Astrology in Medieval Civilization, which covers astrology in its religious and cultural contexts from the beginning of the Christian Era through the European Renaissance; mathematics used in astronomical/astrological observations and celestial navigation; and the relationship between astrology, the sciences, and the Christian, Islamic, and pagan philosophies of the medieval period. The students are offered BA tracks of study. My favorite is called Astrology and the New Sciences. It includes topics such as chaos theory and fractal mathematics, applying whole systems theory and holography to astrology, relativity and the unified field theory and its relationship to astrology, and the basics of quantum theory and its potential relationship to astrology.

Kepler's application for degree authorization to the state of Washington stresses a cross-disciplinary liberal arts curriculum that weaves astrology into history, math, and science courses. These materials and their Web site (www.kepler.edu) hint at a broader agenda: to legitimize astrology. Promotional materials on the Web clearly state

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Robert Siegel, host of NPR's *All Things Considered*, Joyce Jensen stated her belief the accreditation does lend credibility to astrology. When Siegel asked how she thought it would do this, Jensen focused on the vocation, not the science: "Because, you know, we've gone through the same process that every other school has gone through. So we've proven our ability to provide a program where people can find employment." For Jensen the popular perception of astrology as a legitimate vocation trumps the question of scientific credibility.

The nationwide accreditation of the institute takes astrology out of the realm

of evening workshops at the local high school and "entertainment" horoscopes. In practical terms, as Fraknoi fears, the recognition elevates the subject to the same level as any other program at any other college or university. Accreditation will open the doors to student financial aid and grants paid for by federal tax dollars. It will also professionalize a lucrative business where, according to Jensen, astrologers charge clients between \$150 and \$300 per hour. By seeking the stamp of approval for the teaching of a vocation, the Astrology Institute has deftly shifted the question away from the qualifications of astrology to the qualifications of the astrologer.

Kevin Christopher is Public Relations Director for CSICOP.

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this agenda with comments such as "Kepler College will provide an academic setting for accurate and objective research projects by those who are well-versed in astrology, countering less-than-accurate and biased research conclusions from other less informed academicians."

Washington's authorization of degree programs in astrology gives Kepler College an air of legitimacy that Kepler will use to expand the prominence of astrology. Kepler's Web site states, "Kepler College will provide a broader acceptance for the use of astrology in a wide range of businesses and professions. Kepler College will provide an honorable place for astrology in society now that standards are defined, just as psychology, chiropractic, naturopathic, naturopathic healthcare, and acupuncture have gained respect." Kepler administrators believe that their new status can garner additional funding. "Kepler College will provide the higher education setting necessary to receive government and private grant money for research and scholarships."

Kepler's masters program offers a

degree in counseling. The Web site states, "This program focuses on the accepted theory and practice in psychological and philosophical counseling and advising and how astrology can be used as an integral component of any counseling practice. This study is designed as comparable to a Master's in Social Work with an emphasis in Counseling." Does this imply that a graduate from Kepler College can set up a private counseling practice? The state of Washington did not consider this aspect of Kepler's degree program or its implications in their Letter of Authorization.

Newberg laments that there are many critics of Kepler College. John Silber, chancellor of Boston University wrote an op-ed piece for the *Boston Globe*, "Silliness under Seattle Stars" (May 16, 2001), strongly criticizing Washington for authorizing Kepler's degree programs. "The simple existence of Kepler College is worth little comment," wrote Silber. "Where there are humans, there will be folly, and institutions to advance it. But Kepler College claims that it is 'the only college of astrology in the Western Hemisphere authorized to issue BA and MA degrees.' This authorization does not come from the National Association

of Astrologers, Witch Doctors, and Soothsayers. To the contrary, Kepler is accredited by the Higher Education Coordinating Board of the state of Washington. Thus, this board used the power of the law to make Kepler the peer of the University of Washington."

Hardly anyone would claim that the HEC Board's actions makes Kepler College the peer of the University of Washington. Many institutions in the state are authorized by the HEC Board, and their perceived quality covers a broad spectrum. While Washington state's "authorization" may appear to endorse astrology, the HEC Board points out that authorization is independent of accreditation. In correspondence between the HEC Board and Kepler College, the HEC Board clearly requires Kepler College to not use the term "accredited." Any implication of accreditation is grounds for the HEC Board to repeal authorization. Kepler College therefore walks a fine line when its Web site reads, "Astrology Regains Academic Standing."

So what does Washington state mean by *authorization*? According to Karen Oelschlager, an administrative assistant at the Higher Education Coordinating Board, all educational institutions must meet minimum administrative requirements such as showing guidelines for administration and governance and having clear documentation spelling out program requirements, faculty qualifications, and admission requirements. In addition, the institution must provide academic support resources, financial resources, and catalogs that provide full disclosure of programs, policies and procedures to potential students.

Says Oelschlager: "The decision to authorize an institution or deny an institution for authorization must be based solely on whether the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) and Washington Administrative Code (WAC) requirements have been met by an institution. Authorization by the Higher Educational Coordinating Board means that a degree-granting institution can operate within

the state. Authorization is not an endorsement by the Higher Education Coordinating Board of an institution, a program offered by the institution, or the contents of a program. Potential students and employers determine the 'value' of a degree program offered by any institution."

This past summer marked the first anniversary of Kepler College, whose authorization is up for renewal on March 9, 2002. Supporters are hopeful that the establishment of a college that hands out diplomas in astrology will usher in a new millennium of broader acceptance of astrology while the skeptics are fuming. Only the stars can predict how Kepler's future will play out.

Mark G. Kuzyk is a professor and Associate Chair of physics at Washington State University.

Was the 'Rare Earth' Hypothesis Influenced by a Creationist?

The idea that complex life may have evolved only as a result of a series of exceedingly rare events on Earth, and its corollary—that advanced life may well be rare in the universe—gained new credence and respectability with publication last year of the book *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life Is Uncommon in the Universe*. The book, by two University of Washington scientists, Peter D. Ward, a paleontologist, and Donald Brownlee, an astronomer, is an extensive argument for the Rare Earth hypothesis, and it has gained considerable scientific and popular attention.

(*Rare Earth* was summarized in the SI July/August 2000 New Books column and reviewed in the November/December 2000 issue.)

Now David Darling, an astronomer who is a critic of the Rare Earth hypothesis, has revealed that one of the strongest influences on the authors, a young University of Washington astronomer who they acknowledge in their preface "changed many of our

views about planets and habitable zones," has a hidden, Earth-is-unique agenda motivated by strong "intelligent design" religious views.

"The idea that there's something very special about our planet has always been essential to those who maintain that Earth and Man are of divine origin," notes Darling, in a newly published book about astrobiology, the term now gaining currency for the study of life in the universe.

"... Surprisingly, at the dawn of the twenty-first century," says Darling, "religious influence is once again being brought to bear on the question of whether or not the Earth is somehow special. Without many people realizing it, debate in astrobiology is being actively manipulated by deeply held theological beliefs."

Darling's revelations come in a chapter "Rare Earths and Hidden Agendas" in *Life Everywhere: The Maverick Science of Astrobiology* (Basic Books/Perseus, 2001). Darling bills his book as "a report from the frontline of astrobiological research," and he shares the view of many scientists that a rush of recent discoveries has brought about a "surge in scientific optimism about the prospects for alien life."

In his chapter on the Ward and Brownlee book, Darling acknowledges that it has enlivened debate about exobiology within the scientific community—he describes the scientific reaction as mixed—while being embraced by the religious right as vindication of their belief in the special nature of the Earth.

Darling begins with a point-by-point scientific critique of the Rare Earth hypothesis. The hypothesis essentially says that for life to evolve and survive beyond the microbial stage a very special combination of factors must prevail (such as presence of a large moon to stabilize the planet's orbit, a Jupiter-size planet to sweep up killer asteroids, the occurrence of plate tectonics, and a sun with high

"metallicity") and that these other factors are both rare in themselves and absolutely indispensable to complex life. Darling examines each in turn and concludes that the hypothesis is based on circular reasoning and that the proponents have fallen into the trap of going out of their way to find reasons why Earth is special.

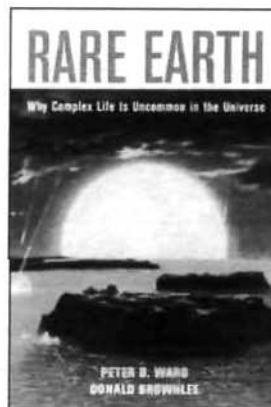
"The Rare Earth theory is neither hypothesis nor prediction, but a description of how life arose on Earth," says Darling. He says Ward and Brownlee "actually pick and choose the factors that best suit their case."

"What matters is not whether there's anything unusual about the Earth; there's going to be something idiosyncratic about every planet in space," says Darling. "What matters is whether any of Earth's circumstances are not only unusual but also essential for complex life. So far we've seen nothing to suggest there is."

"The more you think of it," says Darling, "the more it seems there's something odd about the Rare Earth hypothesis. At a time when many of our scientific indicators suggest, if anything, that life of every description, from the most primitive to the most complex, may be widespread, along comes this curious rebuttal."

Darling says Ward and Brownlee have been heavily influenced by a young University of Washington astronomer, Guillermo Gonzalez, whom they acknowledge in their preface. "More than anyone," Darling says, "he's [Gonzalez's] been instrumental in tying the various strains of the Rare Earth argument together and energetically promoting the thesis across a broad front."

"Although he personally may not be well known, his writings and opinions have been widely disseminated in publications ranging from *The Wall Street Journal* to *Scientific American*. More to the point, he's played an important role in influencing Ward and Brownlee."



"I mentioned that I have a stack of articles by Gonzalez," writes Darling. "In fact I have two stacks." By happenstance, Darling came across a copy of *Connections*, a quarterly newsletter published by Reasons to Believe, Inc., of Pasadena, California, whose mission is "to communicate the uniquely factual basis for belief in the Bible."

"The first article in this particular issue—Volume 1, Number 4, 1999—was Live Here or Nowhere, by Hugh Ross (the president of Reasons to Believe and a well-known creationist scientist) and a certain Guillermo Gonzalez," says Darling. He checked and confirmed that "this was indeed Gonzalez the astronomer and chief Rare Earth campaigner."

That Ross-Gonzalez article concludes: "The fact that the Sun's location is fine-tuned to permit the possibility of life—and even more precisely fine-tuned to keep the location fixed in that unique spot where life is possible—powerfully suggests divine design."

In contrast, Darling notes, Gonzalez's articles in the scientific literature arguing the uniqueness of Earth contain no mention of divine intervention.

"A little more research," Darling writes, "reveals that Gonzalez has been living something of a double life, producing standard scientific output on the one hand and, more or less simultaneously, penning other articles on similar topics in which the same conclusions are presented solely for the purpose of supporting the design argument."

In fact, Gonzalez is a regular contributor to Reasons to Believe pamphlets. In a 1997 piece, he concluded: "The personal involvement of a supernatural Creator seems scientifically reasonable to me." A 1998 article ends this way: "Scientists are left to wonder how Earth came to exist and persist for so long in the zone where life is possible. The impression of design could hardly be more distinct."

Darling notes that scientists' religious views ordinarily are irrelevant. "It isn't unusual for professional scientists to hold strong religious beliefs. Most of the time, it isn't relevant or, frankly, anyone's

business. But in the case of Gonzalez it matters because his underlying conviction has led him to play a very significant role in raising the prominence of the Rare Earth debate."

Darling assumed that Ward and Brownlee must be aware of their colleague Gonzalez's deep theological convictions. But when he asked Ward about this eight months after their book's publication, he found otherwise.

"That is news to me. I have never seen or even heard that Gonzalez does this. . . . Are you sure you have the right Gonzales?" Ward responded to Darling. Darling assured Ward there was no doubt.

"I think I need an explanation," Ward told Gonzalez in forwarding the e-mail exchange about this between Darling and Ward.

Gonzalez responded this way to Ward (as quoted in Darling's book):

Regarding his [Darling's] statement about my "secret agenda" as a design advocate, it is not such a secret, as my writing on the design issue is rather public and widely distributed. I recently received a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to study habitability from a design perspective—several people in the department know about it. I have not been more open about my pro-design views here at the UW because of the open hostility to such views among the faculty. But I will not apologize for admitting that my theistic theological views motivate my science and vice-versa.

"So here is a curious situation of a scientist actively seeking evidence that extraterrestrial life is rare to shore up a belief in divine design," Darling writes. "And doing it, moreover, without the knowledge of many of his peers, who are nevertheless being strongly influenced by work that is intrinsically biased."

—Kendrick Frazier

Kendrick Frazier is editor of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER. Before that he was editor, and earth sciences editor, of Science News.



Michel de Nostredame ("Nostradamus")

Bogus Nostradamus Prophecies Circulate Following Terrorism

Within days of the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Centers in New York City, a flurry of e-mails circulated the Internet claiming that the attack had been foreseen by the French astrologer Nostradamus. A dozen or so quatrains were proffered; some were entirely fictional, others were partly embellished actual verse, but not one truly foretold the tragedy.

Such stories are not new, of course: After nearly every national tragedy, prognosticators claim to have predicted the events. Psychics come out of the woodwork with stories of premonitions of doom, or clutching predictions they wrote ahead of time.

Meanwhile, those who believe in prophecy sift through reams of vague writings and quatrains of writers like Edgar Cayce and Nostradamus, trying to breathe new life into stale words. This is perhaps part of a psychological need to participate in the outpouring of emotions or to seem important.

The following is a typical example of the e-mailed prophecies:

Two steel birds will fall from the sky
on the Metropolis.
The sky will burn at forty-five
degrees latitude.
Fire approaches the great new city.

Immediately a huge, scattered flame leaps up.
Within months, rivers will flow with blood.
The undead will roam the earth for little time.

Much was made of the second line, as New York City (the putative Metropolis), lies at about forty degrees north latitude—though not forty-five. New York, despite its appellation, is hardly a “great new city,” and is in fact one of the oldest cities in America.

This piece is a hybrid of actual Nostradamus verse and fiction, though the author was sloppy and even a glimmer of skepticism betrays this as a fraud. Not only does it lack the usual quatrain form, but the bit about the “two steel birds” is particularly strange, as steel wasn’t in wide use until nearly 300 years after Nostradamus died. Another quatrain read:

In the city of God there will be a great thunder.
Two brothers torn apart by Chaos while the fortress endures.
The great leader will succumb,
The third big war will begin when the big city is burning.

—Nostradamus 1654

Given the fact that Nostradamus died in 1566, eighty-eight years before the quatrain was supposedly written, it seems a remarkable piece indeed.

This verse was actually published several years ago on the Web page of a student at a Canadian university as part of an essay on how easily important-sounding prophecy can be created using vague imagery. It is ironic that what began as an essentially skeptical, anti-prophecy piece became (intentionally or otherwise) circulated as the real thing.

A similar experiment was reported in the May/June 2001 issue of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, “The Antinous Prophecies,” in which author Clifford Pickover created nonsensical poems and presented them as recently discovered prophecies. Many people created elaborate, real-world interpretations of the fictional lines. Pickover termed the prophecies “verbal ink blots” which rely on modern readers to easily interpret vague descriptions.

As with all such predictions, they only come “true” after the fact as people reinterpret phrases based on what happened.

The Nostradamus prophecies were only one of many rumors and bits of misinformation that circulated following the attacks. For more information, see CSICOP’s Hoaxwatch page at www.csicop.org/hoaxwatch or the urban legends reference page at www.snopes.com.

—Benjamin Radford

Benjamin Radford wrote about Nostradamus’s failed 1999 prophecies in the May/June 2000 issue of SI, and has written on Internet hoaxes and urban legends.

Hardly a Prayer on ABC’s ‘Downtown’

On May 31, 2000, I was flown to New York by Caron Shapiro, a producer for ABC-TV’s *20/20* newsmagazine who was preparing a report about medical studies that support the healing power of distant prayer—even with patients unaware that they were being prayed for. Michael Guillen, the network’s science editor (and a 1997 James Randi Educational Foundation “Pegasus Award” recipient for his “indiscriminate promotion of pseudoscience and quackery”), would be the correspondent, and was interviewing some of the participants himself. But Shapiro wanted to interview me personally.

When we were done more than an hour later, before Shapiro treated me to dinner, she told me that my open-minded-yet-skeptical comments would serve as a “focal point” (or words to that effect) tying the elements of the piece together. When I asked how she could be so certain that I wouldn’t be chopped down to about thirty seconds, as is typically the case with skeptics on such programs, she told me that she was also the story’s editor, and that Guillen would essentially be following her script.

Well, would you believe *twenty* seconds (plus twenty-five seconds of Guillen attempting to summarize my views)? I could hardly believe it—when the story

finally aired August 13, 2001, on the *20/20* stepchild called *Downtown*—but in hindsight the clues had been there. Shapiro’s report had been sitting for a year, first tentatively scheduled for last fall on the more prestigious *20/20* with Barbara Walters. When I last inquired of Shapiro on May 23 of this year, she reassured me that the piece was not being reedited and sensationalized. From her e-mail: “Relax, it’s [still] mine.” But within two weeks she left ABC (I suspect she was one of the many producers let go this spring as a cost-cutting measure).

More foreshadowing: The *Good Morning America* promos on air date were unsettlingly uncritical. As the story began that night, someone other than Shapiro was credited as editor. Guillen immediately referred to the prayer-advocating researchers as “skeptical scientists.” And, as the program progressed, if anyone was serving as a “focal point,” it was paranormalist author Dr. Deepak Chopra, who even conducted a “stare experiment” with Guillen, demonstrating how Chopra’s concentrated bursts of silent prayer, from a distant room, had a calming effect on Guillen’s nervous system.

More than eight minutes into the ten-minute transcendental lovefest, enter the lone assassin. They didn’t use special effects to perch me on a grassy knoll, but they did use the least open-minded sound bite that Shapiro had evoked from me (about “junk science”), followed several seconds later by my comment on “chance alone.” And how persuasive was my glorious appearance? Immediately thereafter, Chopra did acknowledge, “At the moment I would agree that some of these studies are tentative [and] that we should be a little cautious in the way we interpret the results. . . .” But at the show’s conclusion, a viewer poll was running nine to one in favor of the healing power of distant prayer.

—Gary P. Posner, M.D.

Gary Posner, contributing editor to The Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine and a CSICOP consultant, has posted his prayer-related articles at <http://members.aol.com/garypos/prayer.html>.



Chandra Ann Levy

'Psychic Flies' Feed on Levy Disappearance

As the search for missing Washington, D.C., former intern Chandra Levy enters its fifth month, the evidence trail is quickly fading. A case that drew so much media frenzy was certain to draw the flies, and sure enough the parade of people proffering tips on Levy's whereabouts include alleged psychics, seers, and attention-seekers.

Most police departments investigate all tips from all sources, including alleged psychics. A tip is a tip, and just like any other information, the vast majority of them will be wrong but the few that might turn up important information cannot be ignored. When psychics turn out to be right it is because they either guessed correctly, gave very vague information open to later interpretation ("retrofitting"), used information already available through normal means, or made so many different guesses that some had to be right.

A survey published in the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* (Vol. 17, Number 2, Winter 1993) by Jane Sweat and Mark Durm found that, among police departments of the fifty largest U.S. cities, nearly two-thirds had never used psychics. Those that had said that none had provided any information more useful than from other

sources, and many were unhappy with the alleged psychics' involvement. Said an Austin, Texas, police department spokesman: "Information received has been voluntary, unreliable, and useless to our investigation."

In the Levy case, the most prolific tips come from psychics. The D.C. police detectives receive about fifty to eighty tips each day, resulting in thousands each month. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Executive Assistant Chief Terrance Gainer said, "The psychic ones, frankly, I don't think we give much credence to. I don't mean to start a war with all the psychics, but they haven't proven very useful." In fact, Gainer said that many of the leads the psychics offered contradicted known information. "You got 100 different psychics, and they've got 100 different places. They've got her in a cave. Some have her in Nevada. Some have her in water. How can all these psychic radars be all over the country? Who's right?" Gainer has a point: if all these psychics really have the powers they claim, why do they contradict not only the available evidence but each other?

Tipsters claimed that Levy was hidden in a mansion; being held hostage by a boxer; stuffed in a California storage locker; buried at a military base in Fort Lee, Virginia; drowned in the Potomac river, and thousands of other places. At least one person contacted the police claiming that Levy had been abducted by extraterrestrial aliens.

Even well-known psychic Sylvia Browne offered an opinion from "the other side." In an interview with Paula Zahn of the Fox News Channel, Browne said that Levy's body was located near "some trees in a marshy area . . . but this girl is not alive." When Zahn asked how she knew that, Browne rasped, "Because I'm a psychic." (Browne's "vision," by the way, is a typical "safe" psychic response: If a body is buried, the chances are good that trees and/or water are somewhere near—especially given the wooded geography of the Northeast where Levy disappeared.)

On September 4, 2001, State Rep. Dorothy Pelote from Georgia joined the din of psychic predictions. During the House's daily devotional message, she claimed that the ghost of Levy had communicated with her. "I want you to know I can prophesy," she announced to her fellow lawmakers. "I can communicate with the dead. The last person who visited me was [Chandra Levy]. . . . She really didn't say anything. I saw her. When I saw her, she was lying in a ditch and her eyes was [*sic*] closed. She was in a wooded area in a ditch."

There have also been many instances of psychics contacting the families of missing children and offering their services—for a fee of several hundred dollars or more. The parents are usually so desperate for any information that they willingly pay, even if they are skeptical.

Jodi Himebaugh, the father of a boy missing since 1991, said that no psychic asked him for money. He believes instead many were involved because they sought some sort of spiritual validation. After his son disappeared, he said, the psychics started coming around "like flies on horse manure."

Even those psychics who do not exploit the bereaved for monetary gain are still hurting instead of helping the situation. Aside from falsely raising the family's hopes, psychic tipsters waste valuable police time and resources following up on the bogus information they provide. Each hour a detective or police officer wastes chasing dead ends is an hour that could be used trying to find the missing person. And time is especially critical in missing person cases.

Ivana DiNova of a missing children center in Tampa, Florida, said that "When the information they give families doesn't pan out, the family is literally devastated again. I feel deep down in my heart they should be . . . held responsible for what they tell families. They should have some group monitor them."

—Benjamin Radford

Benjamin Radford is Managing Editor of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*.

Nothing But Trouble in Miss Cleo's Tarot Cards

Miss Cleo—the new juggernaut of psychic hotline telemarketing—has been embroiled in lawsuits garnering national attention. During the past year, television in the United States has been glutted with ads featuring Miss Cleo, who prognosticates in an exotic Jamaican lilt for an off-screen voice viewers might assume is a caller. Waving her jewelled hand over a tarot spread, she amazes the off-screen voice with her insights into love and money.

Apparently the tarot cards never gave Miss Cleo any warnings of lawsuits or stool pigeons. The tarot hotline company's troubles began on November 1, 2000, when Pennsylvania Attorney General Mike Fisher filed a lawsuit against Access Resource Services, Inc., the outermost layer of corporate identity for the tarot hotline. The lawsuit was precipitated by 125 consumer complaints about misleading direct mail solicitations from Miss Cleo which promised thirty "free" minutes of psychic talk time. According to the November 1, 2000, press release issued by the Pennsylvania attorney general's press office, customers who called the 800 number expecting the half hour of free phone time were bilked by four methods: 1) callers placed on hold were falsely promised that they wouldn't be charged for the time they waited to be connected to a psychic reader; 2) callers were connected to a pay-per-call line without their knowledge; 3) callers were falsely promised that they were entitled to free gifts and free phone time with a psychic; and 4) callers were directed to a 900 number for a "free" reading, but when they actually called that number they were informed that if they hung up they would be billed for the call—including the "free" reading. One former Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, resident told the attorney general's office that she was charged for more than \$700 worth

of "Psychic Network" calls she claims she never made.

A July 26, 2001, CNN story announced that the attorney general of the state of Missouri, Jeremiah Nixon, filed two suits against Access Resource Services, Inc. and its registered agents, American Information Services, Inc. of Miami, Florida, and Lexis-Nexis Corporate Services of Dover, Delaware. According to one suit, filed in the St. Louis circuit court, the three corporate defendants were accused of ninety-four



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violations of Missouri's "Telemarketing No-Call List" law. The law allows consumers to register themselves on a list barring telemarketers who operate in the state from calling them.

An August 8, 2001, Associated Press story by Paul Sloca reported that Access Resource Services, Inc., agreed to pay \$75,000 in fines and will obtain a copy of the state's no-call list of 800,000 numbers as its settlement with the State of Missouri. The other Missouri lawsuit, filed in Jefferson County, and accusing the defendants of falsely advertising a free three minutes, is still pending.

On August 1, 2001, Mark Austin, reporter for KSAT-TV in San Antonio, Texas, interviewed a former employee of the Miss Cleo hotline who wished to remain anonymous. According to this

former call-taker, "She's [Miss Cleo] just an actress. She doesn't even read cards. 16153 is her extension, if you call. You won't get through to her. You'll get another reader." The woman alleges that she was trained on methods of getting callers to stay on the line beyond the three minutes offered for free and glean information useful to badger them into calling back: "We'd get a bonus for every piece of information they'd get, and by the time we got all of this information out of them, the three free minutes was up, and then you'd go on to your reading."

All news stories published so far have been content to cite Access Resource Services, a Delaware corporation based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, as the corporation that owns and operates the Miss Cleo enterprise. Thanks to Florida's freedom of information laws, I have researched Miss Cleo and found a tangled web of companies. The main hive of activity is lodged on the tenth floor of an office building in Fort Lauderdale. The registered agent of Access Resource Services, Inc. is a corporation called American Information Services, Inc., based in Miami. According to its online privacy statement, the Web sites operated by the company include the following: mindandspiritclub.com, cleoreading.com, tarotsecrets.com, tarotsecret.com, cleoprediction.com, cleopredictions.com, myfreereading.com, cleocontest.com, meetcleo.com, cleospirit.com, visitleo.com, mindandspiritpin.com, mindandspiritmember.com, misscleo.com, cleotalk.com, cleotarot.com, cleotarotcards.com, famouscleo.com, mrscleo.com, mycleo.com, mymisscleo.com, cleoenergy.com, cleomembers.com, cleoreadings.com, cleopsy-chic.com, freecleo.com, cleofanclub.com, and cleotarotcards.com.

Anyone who feels they have been bilked by Miss Cleo is urged to contact your state's attorney general. Contact information can found at www.naag.org.

—Kevin Christopher □