

A STATEMENT ON THE DEATHS OF ANGELA SMITH AND RICKY RODRIGUEZ

On Saturday evening, January 8, 2005, in Tucson, Arizona, Angela M. Smith (51) was brutally murdered by Ricky P. Rodriguez (29), who later that night committed suicide. Angela Smith had been a member of the Christian missionary group the Family International for over 30 years. She had recently moved from her home on the mission field to live close by an ailing aunt in California.

Ricky Rodriguez was the son of the spiritual head of the Family, Karen Zerby, known in the Family as Maria David. He had left the Family on good terms in 2000, but later became estranged from his mother and sister. He then posted bitter complaints about his upbringing in the Family on several Internet sites, and in one of those posts, threatened to kill his mother. Unable to discover his mother's location, he apparently settled on murdering Angela, who had in the past lived with her.

Angela was a board member of the non-profit old-age home run by Maria David's personal family in Tucson. The Zerby family is in no wise affiliated with the missionary group, the Family International. Angela Smith had in the past visited and helped the Zerby family and was asked by the members of that family to become a board member of their retirement home in 2003. She did this as a private individual and not in her then capacity as a member of the Family.

In the months prior to her tragic death, Angela had written Maria David and other friends in the Family, telling of her desire to take a furlough from the Family. It was our hope that she would find fulfillment and happiness in her new life. She got a job and settled down in California. She apparently was involved in various social causes while there. She was a vibrant, outgoing, and friendly woman who favorably

impressed those she met, as is documented in the comments of her last employer, published in a local newspaper:

News of Smith's death has been especially painful to the staff at Palo Alto's Restoration Hardware, who remember their co-worker as an exceptionally kind and trusting spirit. "Always something sweet," said Gretchen Mills, who took a chance and hired Smith though she had no retail experience.

Mills said Smith caught on quickly, winning over customers and staff with a ready smile and warm personality. She brought snacks for the stock team and would interest herself in the details of her co-workers' lives—remembering to ask about dates and doctors appointments. (*San Jose Mercury News*, Jan. 18, 2005)

In early January she went to Tucson to attend the biannual board meeting of the retirement home. While there, Ricky Rodriguez invited her out to dinner. After dinner she went with him to his apartment, where he killed her by stabbing her numerous times and slitting her throat. It was a brutal, premeditated murder. Then he drove to Blythe, California, where he shot himself.

The day prior to the crime, Ricky had made a chilling videotape, copies of which he sent to certain friends who were instructed to pass them on to the media and to his mother. On this tape, he makes reference to his intent to kill Angela. He held a gun in his hand, and on the table at which he sat lay several

other weapons, among them two knives, one of which he explained was going to be his “weapon of choice.”

In the first wave of media reports, some former Family members claimed that the reason Ricky killed Angela was that she had abused him when he was a child. These allegations were parroted by the media. However, there is no record of Ricky ever accusing Angela Smith of any kind of abusive treatment. Even in the video made before murdering her, he made no such claim.

Peter Amsterdam, Maria David’s husband, wrote the following to Family members shortly after they heard what had happened:

Ricky had at the time been living and working in Tucson for several months. He was in friendly contact with his mother’s relatives and had recently gotten a job as an electrician. We had been praying for him to find something that he was happy doing. Communications from Ricky were nonexistent in recent years, and ours to him were limited to sending him Christmas or birthday greetings.

Much of the time that Ricky lived with his mother and me, Angela also lived with us. During all those years that they both lived with us, until Ricky was approximately 20 years old, he never showed any unhappiness with Angela at all. They were friends. Angela was also never Ricky’s nanny, as has been contended. Angela was always a secretary during her time in our Home.

Ricky and his wife left our Home in early 2000, and continued on in the Family for a few months, first in a Home in Southern California, then in England, and then in Venezuela. His mother and I helped them all we could to get them set up in a Family Home. We gave them a gift and funds to get started, and for several months we continued in fairly close communi-

cation with them, and they wrote some sweet letters that showed they were happy and wanting to be in the Family.

It wasn’t until they left the Family, and started having a lot of contact with some very vindictive apostates, that Ricky started coming out with accusations against us, complaints about his upbringing, and demands for money. As his contact with these apostates grew, so did his complaints. This is the cycle of apostasy, which is well documented in scholarly writings. Eventually he told us that he didn’t want to be in contact with us at all, and to please stop writing him. Some time later, he came out with a physical threat in a post on a Web site, saying he wanted to find us and kill us.

Some of Ricky’s associates apparently were aware of the seriousness of Ricky’s threats. They had heard him talk about his desire to kill his mother and they knew he had a penchant for knives. We can only assume that they tried, unsuccessfully, to convince him that this was wrong.

Others are now trying to make Ricky look like an innocent victim, and even a hero and role model, ignoring the fact that he murdered someone. He claimed that it was his deserved “revenge” because of alleged abuses. No matter what his motives might have been, and no matter how overcome by “darkness” he was at the time, that does not justify his killing someone. He was not the victim; *Angela* was the victim. She was a wonderful woman who suffered a cruel and violent death.

Ricky was 29 years old. He made his own decisions—decisions that his mother had nothing to do with. His mother went to every length she could to love Ricky, to try to

communicate with him, and to pray for him. This turn of events is very sad for his mother and me. (From a letter by Peter Amsterdam to Family members)

Family members are shocked and grieving about what has happened. Our Christian faith and belief in the afterlife bring comfort, but we are outraged that this tragedy is now being manipulated to try to cause Family members harm. Family members are dedicated, caring individuals who give their lives in service to God and humanity.

We have also received messages of condolences from many former members who are as shocked as we are by what has happened. The vast majority of former members are not antagonistic towards the Family. They lead fulfilling lives and are happy with their careers and lifestyle choices. We wish them well.

However, some of those who have left us are propagating stories that child abuse is common in the Family. This is false. The Family has a zero-tolerance policy toward abusive treatment of minors, punishable by excommunication, a policy which has been in place since 1988.

In the late '70s the Family's founder, David Berg, and others published some articles in regards to sex being a God-created natural activity, which could be engaged in without inhibition or sin. This opened the door for sexual experimentation between adults and adults, and minors with minors. However, unfortunately in some cases the lines blurred. In 1986, David Berg and Maria David, realizing that stringent safeguards hadn't been put in place to protect minors, banned such conduct involving minors and put those safeguards in place. In 1988, David Berg renounced all literature, including his own, that indicated in any way that sexual activity with minors was permissible. All such literature was expunged from our communities. He clearly stated that any sexual activity between an adult and a minor was *not* to be tolerated. It was from that time forward that the Family made this grounds for immediate excommunication from our fellowship.

Over the past decade, numerous official apologies have been published by Maria David

to anyone who was hurt in any way during their time in the Family.

Our zero-tolerance policy has been successful in protecting minors in our communities from abuse. This was confirmed in the early '90s when the authorities in Argentina, France, Spain, and Australia were given false information by ex-members, alleging that children in Family Homes were being abused. This caused our communities to be the objects of pre-dawn raids by the police in those four countries. The allegations that gave rise to these raids are the same ones being made now.

This is how Claire Borowick, a mother who was arrested in the raid in Argentina and whose then seven-year-old son was held by the social services of that country for four months, describes their experiences:

The allegations of two or three former members, that were hyped up to convince authorities of institutionalized child abuse, neglect, and beatings, led to actions that caused untold trauma in the lives of hundreds of children over a prolonged period of time. Too often the suffering of our children isn't taken into account, since they're painted as "cult members" who don't have the same rights as other people. Being yanked away from their parents for four months, told they'd never see them again, denied even their basic physical needs, treated like cattle, having their sexual parts intrusively examined by teams of seven male doctors (even girls 10 years old), frightened and treated like criminals—then, all the allegations are proven false.

My son was literally abused in a government-run institution in Argentina for four months, where he was not allowed to have more than one change of clothes for the duration of their confinement, and the children were left to sit in soiled clothes when they urinated themselves due to fear. They were told their parents were abusers and they

would never see them again. They were placed in a warehouse without facilities and uncared for. One hundred and fifty members, and nearly three hundred children, were subjected to brutal treatment and psychological “warfare,” and the female children suffered intrusive gynecological examinations against their will. This was in Argentina alone.

If the authorities mounted unexpected raids, carted off over 600 children in several countries in the early '90s, submitted them to grueling psychological and physical examinations under dire and unexpected circumstances, and found no trace of any kind of abuse whatsoever in even a single case, then it should be abundantly clear to everyone, as it was to the courts in these countries, that children in our communities are safe from sexual abuse.

While about half of the young people who grow up in the Family decide to pursue other lifestyles and vocations when they reach their twenties, half of them remain in the Family. There are 1,800 second generation members ages 18 and older in the Family. They are happy to be Family members, happy to serve God and their fellow man, and happy to raise their children within the Family. (Claire Borowick)

All the Family members involved were exonerated in each of the court cases that arose from these raids, and all charges were dismissed. The judge in one case rebuked the authorities and the prosecutors for mounting the raids without evidence, and in another case the raid was found to be illegal. The Family has published a summary of these court cases in a document entitled “Religious Freedom on Trial.” This can be found at <http://www.thefamily.org/dossier>. We encourage you to download this document and read it, as well as

the document “Religious Persecution,” found on the same Web page. Printed versions are also available on request.

The Family’s success in protecting our children and ensuring their well-being has been documented by independent and court-appointed investigations. At the time of these raids in the early 1990s, over 600 children living in Family communities were subjected to extensive physical, psychological, and educational testing. All of the children were found to be healthy, and no sign of abuse was found.

But those accusing us of these crimes are saying that they occurred approximately 20 years ago, a period much closer to the raids and investigations than now. If evidence was not found then, when it was searched for in vigorous and very intrusive ways, why would it be found now? These allegations have been investigated and have not been substantiated. We ask you to carefully consider the facts.

Since then, the Family has also been extensively investigated and examined by many social scientists. The findings of those who have done firsthand investigations should seriously be taken into consideration. The media has instead relied on the sensational and unfounded allegations of those who wish to harm our work. A referral list of scholars and organizations familiar with our movement is found at <http://www.thefamily.org/dossier/referrals/index.html>.

Some have also alleged that there is a higher than normal suicide rate among our former members, and they allege that this is proof that something set these people off balance psychologically during their time in the Family. Those making these allegations claim that in the past 15 years of our history, 25 former members have committed suicide. We have not been able to confirm more than ten. Of course, ten people taking their own lives is very sad, and we don’t want to minimize that loss.

However, this needs to be put in perspective. Since our founding in 1968, it is estimated that approximately 32,000 people have passed through our movement. This number has not been disputed by our critics. The U.S. national suicide rate for 2001 was 12:100,000 according to the National Institute for Mental Health.

As such, the rate of confirmed suicides that had occurred falls far below the U.S. national average.

In saying this, we want to make it clear that even one suicide is a tragic loss of life and not to be minimized. Thankfully, suicide is extremely rare within our movement, and it seems it is also well below the U.S. national average amongst our former members.

The tragic events that occurred in Tucson and Blythe are almost unfathomable to Family members. Violence is unknown in our communities. That a proponent of love and caring for others such as Angela Smith should die in this cruel and horrible way is very sad. Although we miss Angela very much, we know that she is at peace now and with her Savior.

It is our prayer that the few former Family members and any others currently inciting a

campaign of intolerance will respect the lawful rights of current Family members to practice our religion, carry out our missionary activities, and educate our minor children according to our religious convictions in the same manner that we respect their right to freely choose their own lifestyles and pursue their personal interests. It is our sincere wish that those who were once members of the Family may lead constructive, fulfilling lives and progress to the new goals they set for themselves once they decide they no longer wish to pursue their vocation of serving the Lord with the Family. Our prayer is for reconciliation and mutual respect for the path that each one has chosen of his or her own free will.

The Family International

What Is the Family International?

The Family International (formerly known as the Children of God) is a fellowship of Christian communities with members in over 100 countries. Our current membership numbers about 8,500 full-time members and 7,000 associates.

The Family has four main objectives:

1. To share with others the life-giving message of love, hope, and salvation found in God's Word, conveying the joys of knowing Jesus as a personal Savior.
2. To ensure that each of our children receives a godly upbringing in the best possible environment we can provide.
3. To produce and distribute a wide selection of devotional, inspirational, and educational materials.
4. To actively assist the needy through producing and performing inspirational, dramatic, and musical benefits; serving as volunteers in disaster relief; and seeking ways to provide comfort and material assistance for the disadvantaged.

If you have any questions or comments, we invite you to contact us at one of the following addresses:

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