

## Introduction to Thought Reform and Coercive Persuasion

by Rick Alan Ross

“Thought reform,” a term that describes activity that is more commonly referred to as “coercive persuasion” and, in popular culture, frequently labeled as “brainwashing,” is readily identifiable. Thought reform also includes other forms of coercive and intense indoctrination. Thought reform is employed by destructive authoritarian groups.

### Thought Reform

The methods that I use to understand, analyze and interpret thought reform and the behavior of destructive authoritarian groups include, but are not limited to, criteria based upon the following academic literature.

- *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* by Robert Jay Lifton<sup>1</sup>;
- *Coercive Persuasion: A Social psychological Analysis of the Brainwashing of American Civilian Prisoners by the Chinese Communists* by Edgar H. Schein<sup>2</sup>;
- *Cults in Our Midst: The Continuing Fight Against Their Hidden Menace* by Margret Thaler Singer<sup>3</sup>; and
- *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by Robert B. Cialdini<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Edgar H. Schein, *Coercive Persuasion: A Socio-psychological Analysis of the Brainwashing of American Civilians by the Chinese Communists* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice* (Needham Heights, MA, Allyn & Bacon, 2001).

A thought reform program is generally identifiable based on the criteria (“Lifton’s Criteria”) provided in Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton’s seminal work *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*.

Lifton states, “I wish to suggest a set of criteria against which any environment may be judged a basis for answering the ever-recurring question: ‘but isn’t this just like brainwashing?’” Lifton’s criteria to define thought reform consist of eight psychological themes which are predominant within the social field of the thought reform milieu. The Lifton criteria are as follows: (1) “Milieu Control”; (2) “Mystical Manipulation”; (3) “Demand for Purity”; (4) “Cult of Confession”; (5) “Sacred Science”; (6) “Loading the Language”; (7) “Doctrine over Person”; and (8) “Dispensing of Existence.”

“**Milieu Control**” involves the control of communication and information within a specific environment resulting in a significant degree of isolation from the surrounding society. It is the most basic feature of the thought reform environment. That is, the control of human communication and isolation from society at large. Milieu Control can manifest in physical (i.e., confinement to a location) and/or social (i.e., estrangement from friends and family) form.

Spring Ridge Academy (SRA) has rules that tightly restrict and control the environment of its students. SRA specifically has a rule to “restrict the resident’s ability to participate in the activities,” which includes “associate with individuals of the resident’s choice, receive visitors, make telephone calls, have privacy in correspondence, communication, visitation, financial affairs and personal hygiene, and the use of the bulletin boards, mail and telephone usage.”<sup>5</sup>

SRA also specifically “monitors” and “controls phone calls.”<sup>6 7</sup> This is an ongoing means of controlling communication and the environment, including reading and the radio. According to former SRA student Jennifer, “We had little freedom and were not allowed to close our dorm doors, be alone, listen to the radio, or read anything that had not been approved. A roommate of mine was even put on

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<sup>5</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Statement of Student (Resident) Rights on Page 36, 3.f. and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Statement of Student (Resident) Rights on Page 8, 2.f.

<sup>6</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Pages 15, 17, 21 and 25 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Pages 28, 31, 34 and 38.

<sup>7</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

'reading restriction' once and was not allowed to read any books because they thought it was a distraction."<sup>8</sup>

Jennifer continues, "When I started there, I was not allowed any communication with my parents until I 'earned those privileges,' or to have any contact with friends from home for several months."<sup>9</sup>

Tate, a former SRA student, recounted her experience during 2017: "I wasn't allowed freedom of speech with my family or my peers, and the school even put me and my best friend on S-N-S (silence and separation: no speaking, no eye contact, no physical contact and you can't even be near one another) for three months."<sup>10</sup>

Tate observed, "There were times, when I and many other students wouldn't leave the campus for weeks on end. They have us no contact with the outside world and kept us in a very small bubble."<sup>11</sup>

SRA also controlled friendships. Jennifer says, "I lost the first friend I made at Spring Ridge because the therapist determined we were too close and notified staff that we were not allowed to speak to or be anywhere near each other."<sup>12</sup>

SRA has a specific form of reporting called "Daily Milieu Progress Note." The purpose of the note is to monitor the environment and report on the condition and

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<sup>8</sup> "Jennifer's Story," Breaking Code Silence February 23, 2021  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20220113025117/https://bcsnetwork.org/2021/02/23/jennifersstorysra/> (accessed March 23, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> "Jennifer's Story," Breaking Code Silence February 23, 2021  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20220113025117/https://bcsnetwork.org/2021/02/23/jennifersstorysra/> (accessed March 23, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> "Survivor Spring Ridge Academy 2017," *Trapped In Treatment*  
<https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-2017>  
(accessed March 19, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> "Survivor Spring Ridge Academy 2017," *Trapped In Treatment*  
<https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-2017>  
(accessed March 19, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> "Jennifer's Story," Breaking Code Silence February 23, 2021  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20220113025117/https://bcsnetwork.org/2021/02/23/jennifersstorysra/> (accessed March 23, 2022).

response of clients/students in some detail. This includes interaction with staff and other students, behavior during recreational time and compliance (specifically, how “compliant” they are), which includes rating each student One to Five on everything from “authenticity” to “hygiene.” One is “very poor,” whereas Five is “outstanding.” “A score of Three or less requires notation.”<sup>13</sup> This allows for continuous control of the environment (“Milieu Control”) on an ongoing and detailed basis.

**“Mystical Manipulation”** involves extensive personal manipulation that will appear to have arisen spontaneously from within the environment but is, in fact, planned and calculated by those in control to demonstrate a special kind of mystique, power or authority. The pursuit of this type of manipulation often supersedes considerations of common decency and human welfare. The abused or controlled individual is also frequently required to actively participate in the manipulation of others.

This can be seen through the implementation of what is called “attack therapy” and the response of “forced emoting” that took place. “Children would often be compelled to lie or invent past traumas in order to be viewed as successfully ‘working the program.’”<sup>14</sup>

The SRA “Life Boat” exercise, described as “horrifying,” is another example of Mystical Manipulation. According to Rearden, “They dim all the lights. It’s explained to us that we got in a boating accident and there is not enough room for everyone to be in the life boat. While everyone is screaming, we are supposed to pop up, run to the front of the room, and explain why we should be saved and declare to the room why we deserve to live. It was crazy. Lights were flashing. You are kicked off if you don’t give a good enough reason to live.” The facilitator (Jean Courtney) “sends girls out if they don’t give what she thinks is good enough reason to live.” Ultimately, “most of the girls get kicked out.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Spring Ridge Academy “Daily Milieu Progress Note” dated January 27, 2020, submitted by Jordan B. and Tammy LeBarge.

<sup>14</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraphs 88 to 92.

Mystical Manipulation also took the form of “guided meditation,” where participants were subjected to a process of being taken “through visualizing stages like when we were born.”<sup>16</sup> Brandon Courtney confirmed the use of such visualization techniques.<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> Brandon Courtney explained, “We elicit feelings, and what we want to do is have students aware of what feelings come up for them.”<sup>19</sup>

**“Demand for Purity”** involves those in control painting the world in black and white, pure and the impure. Individuals under control are constantly exhorted to conform to the ideology of the group and strive for “perfection.” Guilt or shame is a powerful control mechanism that is used within this framework.

At SRA, the demand for purity has included “false emoting”<sup>20</sup> to demonstrate consistency with the program and its programmed results. At times, students would also “lie or invent past traumas”<sup>21</sup> to demonstrate their purity of purpose concerning adherence to the program.

**“Cult of Confession”** requires that “sins” or “shortcomings,” as defined by the controlling authorities, must be confessed. This type of confession becomes a means of exploiting an individual's vulnerabilities, when leaders can use the individual's shame to further isolate the individual and increase their dependence upon the leadership.

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<sup>16</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraphs 19 to 24.

<sup>17</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 19, Line 15.

<sup>18</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 107, Lines 3 to 4.

<sup>19</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 30, Lines 14 to 15.

<sup>20</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

SRA lists under the heading “Non-Working Patterns of Thinking, Believing and Behaving.” “Unwillingness to disclose information about ourselves, especially negative information.”<sup>22</sup>

SRA states, “We believe there are no accidents.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, every incident is potentially the basis for confession through which a student takes responsibility. SRA summarizes its contention that “being the victim” must instead become “being accountable.”<sup>24</sup> In many situations, including those that involve criminal behavior (assault, battery, domestic violence, rape, incest, etc.), the responsibility rests with the perpetrator, not the victim. No such distinction is made by SRA in its relentless categorization of human experience. This becomes a premise for confession concerning a past in which the victim is somehow expected to be accountable for wrongdoings perpetrated against her (or even actual accidents or misfortunes).

SRA expects routine confession upon demand. The net result is that the student “begins to self-disclose when prompted.”<sup>25</sup> Also “children would often be compelled to lie or invent past traumas in order to be viewed as successfully ‘working the program.’”<sup>26</sup>

Confession is taken to a further extent, as Rearden describes, “You have to write down all the stuff you are self-conscious about or insecure about and wear it on a name tag. If you are not creative enough, Jeannie will kick you out.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Teen Challenge Workshop: Page 13.

<sup>23</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Belief Statements on Page 4, #20 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Belief Statements on Page 7, #20.

<sup>24</sup> 200122 Parent Challenge Workshop: Approach To Life, Page 6.

<sup>25</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Interpersonal Skills on Page 16 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Interpersonal Skills on Page 29.

<sup>26</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraph 115.

**“Sacred Science”** involves the idea that the doctrine or ideology of the group or organization is the ultimate truth, beyond all question or dispute. Those in control are also above all criticism as the spokesperson for some higher power or purpose. Sacred science achieves a hold over an individual’s process of critical thinking. This may ultimately lead to a feeling of guilt or shame concerning doubts about the doctrine or ideology and/or any harboring of alternative ideas or explanations.

The SRA program must be followed and is always right. This is reiterated through its published literature and training. For example, “Follows SRA’s structure, boundaries and guidelines and accepts redirection.”<sup>28</sup> No alternative is provided or tolerated. Students are told that “working the program” is the only pathway “towards leaving the facility.”<sup>29</sup>

**“Loading the Language”** involves the use of jargon, words and phrases that are unique and often unintelligible to outsiders. The jargon consists of “thought terminating cliches” that provide subscribers with answers to potentially disruptive questions and serve to alter one’s ability to critically think and objectively analyze the situation.

SRA has produced a “Glossary of Terms” that can be seen as potentially thought terminating cliches. This includes words such as “Grungies,” which is defined as “fixed emotional responses that result in short-term manipulation,” and “Iceberg,” as a “reference to how we can be like an iceberg: 10%.”<sup>30</sup> That is, only 10% visible as a “conscious choice,” with 90% remaining below the surface as an “unconscious choice.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Interpersonal Skills on Pages 16 and 19 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Interpersonal Skills on Pages 29 and 32.

<sup>29</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

<sup>30</sup> 200122 Parent Challenge Workshop: Glossary Of Terms, Pages 28 and 29.

<sup>31</sup> 200122 Parent Challenge Workshop: Iceberg Illustration, Page 21.

In particular, the word “Feedback”<sup>32</sup> is used repeatedly by SRA. Feedback is specifically considered a vital and crucial component of the SRA program. However, within the SRA milieu, feedback is often harsh, debilitating and destructive (not to mention subjective) rather than constructive.

Rearden discusses being “in a circle” and talking “about the feedback.” She describes a girl who was “ridiculed” through feedback. And “if she argued against the feedback, she was labeled...as being ‘combative’ and not being receptive to feedback.” Ultimately, the girl was told that she was “not ready to be in Challenge” and instructed, “You need to leave.” She left the training seminar “sobbing.”<sup>33</sup> Subsequently, Rearden, having observed this feedback process, determined that rather than it being an opportunity for an exchange of ideas, it was something else. And she decided to “shut up” and give whatever she thought the facilitator “was looking for.”<sup>34</sup> Thus rather than feedback being a genuine exchange of ideas, it appears to be a thought terminating cliché at SRA.

Rearden summarized the use of feedback, “There is something to be said for taking feedback in your life. But they [SRA] would convolute it.”<sup>35</sup>

**“Doctrine over Person”** involves the idea that the group members’ personal experiences must be subordinated to the sacred science and related interpretation by the leaders. Contrary notions or experiences must be denied or re-interpreted to fit the doctrine of the group. The underlying assumption is that the doctrine is always more important than the person.

Part of the doctrine that SRA students are expected to learn and absorb is based upon popular books such as “The Lost Years” and “The Four Agreements.” These philosophies become part of the framework for living that must supersede personal experience for understanding. These books must be read, reported about and internalized as containing essential truths, perspective and a valid world view.

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<sup>32</sup> 200122 Parent Challenge Workshop: Glossary Of Terms, Page 28.

<sup>33</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraphs 10 to 16.

<sup>34</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraph 17.

<sup>35</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraph 127.

This can also be seen through subordination of experience to the demands of the group regarding the recollection of past trauma. Students were at times “compelled to lie or invent past traumas in order to be viewed as successfully ‘working the program.’”<sup>36</sup>

Rearden recalled that accepting the given narrative according to the leader superseded any other consideration, and so rather than contradict the leader, Rearden “sat down and shut up.”<sup>37</sup>

“**Dispensing of Existence**” involves the idea that a leader or a group has the prerogative to decide who has the right to exist and who does not. Those outside the group are considered “unconscious,” and if they are not converted to the ideas of the group or leader, they will be lost. If those outside the group refuse to change and conform or are critical of the group, they must be rejected, even if they are family members. In conjunction, if any member disagrees and leaves the group, he or she must be rejected too.

SRA effectively uses this aspect of thought reform through its punitive imposition of “forced silence” “solitary confinement/shunning,”<sup>38</sup> which denigrates, dismisses and ultimately dispenses with the existence of students (and parents) controlled by such constraints.

In determining whether thought reform or coercive persuasion techniques are being used by a group, organization or leader, I apply the facts and evidence to the Lifton criteria and framework. If six or more out of the eight criteria are present and evident, it is likely that a thought reform program, i.e., coercive persuasion, is being used by the group, organization or leader to control the behavior, conduct or thinking of those subjected to such controls.

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<sup>36</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

<sup>37</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraphs 115 to 120.

<sup>38</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

## Coercive Persuasion

MIT professor Edgar Schein first summarized the three basic stages of coercive persuasion as “Unfreezing,” “Changing” and “Refreezing.”<sup>39</sup>

Unfreezing is the process of breaking a person down and creating a sense of powerlessness, covert fear and dependence. In this phase of the coercive persuasion process, much of the person’s old behavior and attitudes are suppressed. The following Changing phase of coercive persuasion is devoted to instilling new behavior and attitudes. Refreezing is the final phase, which effectively locks in a closed system of logic that is resistant to any meaningful input or criticism.

SRA states, “We believe the purpose of education is to unsettle the mind.”<sup>40</sup> This unsettling of the mind corresponds to what Schein calls “Unfreezing.”

Subsequently, SRA uses various techniques and tools to change and mold the mind (e.g., hypnosis).<sup>41</sup> Hypnosis can render the subject more suggestible and malleable. This can take the form of “guided meditation.”<sup>42</sup> Brandon Courtney explained, “Yeah. I’ve used ones where I’ve had people go through and do, like, progressive muscle relaxation and then had them visualize if they have a thought or feeling they want to let go, putting it on a leaf and floating it down a river.”<sup>43</sup>

SRA also uses the controlled environment of “seminars” such as the Teen Challenge, Action, Commitment, Parent Challenge, Family 1 and Family 2.

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<sup>39</sup> Edgar H. Schein, *Coercive Persuasion: A Socio-psychological Analysis of the Brainwashing of American Civilian Prisoners by the Chinese Communists* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971).

<sup>40</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Belief Statements on Page 4, #21 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Belief Statements on Page 7, #21.

<sup>41</sup> Therapy at Spring Ridge Quick Info: Spring Ridge Academy Therapeutic Program Page 2 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Our Program: Therapy Page 16.

<sup>42</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraphs 19 to 24.

<sup>43</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 20, Lines 13 to 17.

Family 1 lasts three days and offers “plans for change” or what is called “family sculpting.”<sup>44</sup> These seminars are also called “family trainings.”<sup>45</sup> Through such intensive focused training seminars that continue day after day, SRA can process its sculpting and change participants. “Most people have to do [seminars] multiple times.”<sup>46 47</sup>

Tate recalled the extreme conditions within her seminar training. “These seminars are called Action, Challenge, and Commitment.” “The seminars consisted of intense group therapy for 10+ hours that lasted three days straight. They would deprive us of sleep, food, bathrooms [sic] breaks, and water.”<sup>48</sup> Tate adds, “I had to stand on a chair by myself in front of 50+ people and be judged if I should stay or leave the workshop.” Tate goes on to describe how seminar leaders “proceeded to humiliate and scrutinize me” and “specifically told me that my family didn't love me.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Workshop Program Pages 7 and 8 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Workshops Pages 18 and 19 (errors in document resulted in omissions).

<sup>45</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Workshop Program Pages 7 and 8 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Workshops Pages 18 and 19.

<sup>46</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraph 91.

<sup>47</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraphs 105 and 107.

<sup>48</sup> “Survivor Spring Ridge Academy 2017,” *Trapped In Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-2017> (accessed March 19, 2022).

<sup>49</sup> “Survivor Spring Ridge Academy 2017,” *Trapped In Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-2017> (accessed March 19, 2022).

Brandon Courtney confirmed that the SRA seminars called Action, Challenge and Commitment take two and a half to three consecutive days,<sup>50</sup> with six to eight hours of training each day.<sup>51</sup>

Ara confirmed that “punitive forced labor, solitary confinement/shunning, refusal of proper medical care, withholding of food/water/bathroom access”<sup>52</sup> were techniques employed by SRA in what can be seen as an Unfreezing process that broke down those subjected to such treatment. Ara describes what she calls “attack therapy, forced emoting and limited food”<sup>53</sup> during training. These rigidly run sessions were “the essence of their program.”<sup>54</sup>

“They would also use an isolation punishment called ‘Introspection,’ where you would not be allowed to talk to anyone all day.”<sup>55</sup> Brandon Courtney confirmed this form of restriction. “We’ve had a student go on introspection,” which he described as, “that is where a student is asked to take time to themselves. So, we have them separated from the community in a sense where they don’t interact with the other peers” that lasts “24 hours” possibly “a second day.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 81, Lines 22 to 23.

<sup>51</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 81, Lines 25 to Page 82, Line 3.

<sup>52</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

<sup>53</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

<sup>54</sup> “Survivor, Spring Ridge Academy 1998,” *Trapped in Treatment* <https://trappedintreatment.com/stories/survivor-spring-ridge-academy-1998> (accessed March 20, 2022).

<sup>55</sup> “Jennifer’s Story,” Breaking Code Silence February 23, 2021 <https://web.archive.org/web/20220113025117/https://bcsnetwork.org/2021/02/23/jennifersstorysra/> (accessed March 23, 2022).

<sup>56</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 148, Lines 23 to 25 and Page 149, Line 8 to 9.

Upon completing Teen Challenge, Rearden said, “I never experienced anything like what I went through during Challenge. I felt stripped away—really vulnerable. I was raw—and then they just send you on your way. I was in a daze.”<sup>57</sup>

Brandon Courtney described the purpose of one group exercise, “Really, to encourage a cathartic release by the kids.”<sup>58</sup>

Rearden further commented that based upon the pressure to conform, she learned to accept the preferred narrative and “shut up.”<sup>59</sup>

“SRA validated all the negatives to the max,”<sup>60</sup> says Rearden, and would apparently use those negatives as a tool to break students down and manipulate them.

SRA’s ultimate stated goal is to establish “new patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving.”<sup>61</sup> In contrast to “old patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving,”<sup>62</sup> which must be shed and eliminated.

Change is also shaped through “guided meditation with the lights off.” When the facilitator “would be on a microphone asking you to visualize when you are first

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<sup>57</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraph 27.

<sup>58</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 111, Lines 18 to 19.

<sup>59</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraphs 17 and 120.

<sup>60</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraph 152.

<sup>61</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Parenting Guidelines For Visits Page 12 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Guidelines For Visits Page 25.

<sup>62</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Suggested Family Activities: Pages 18, 22 and 26 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Student And Family Support During Visits: Page 27.

born and trying to spark memories.” This process could become quite emotional. “These exercises got us all so upset. There was sobbing everywhere.”<sup>63</sup>

Brandon Courtney admits that he has had complaints from students about the coercive controlling nature of his conduct. Specifically, he recalls:

“Things, like, I don't listen. At times, I jump to telling them what to do. I've been told I'm just intimidating. Told my facial expressions are scary. At one point, I used -- about a while back, I used the word 'retard,' and a student had an issue with that and so -- yeah, I had students say, do not stand, you know, by my room or can you give more space, things like that, yeah.”<sup>64</sup>

All of these changes must ultimately be locked in or frozen, when participants go through the Refreezing phase. This includes, “Understanding the SRA structure and leading role modeling,”<sup>65</sup> which then “extends functional SRA patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving to home environment.”<sup>66</sup>

The descriptions of Schein's stages of coercive persuasion and how each stage can be correlated to the eight criteria cited by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton to identify a thought reform program is charted by psychologist Margaret Singer in her book, *Cults in Our Midst*.<sup>67</sup>

Unfreezing utilizes the thought reform characteristics of milieu control, loading the language, demand for purity and the cult of confession to break down or unfreeze the individual.

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<sup>63</sup> Declaration of René Rearden Sweidy (aka Jane Doe) March 2, 2022: Paragraph 19.

<sup>64</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 193, Lines 3 to 9.

<sup>65</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Interpersonal Skills: Pages 23 and 28 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Interpersonal Skills: Pages 35 and 40.

<sup>66</sup> Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 09-2019: Therapy Expectations: Pages 24 and 29 and Spring Ridge Academy Parent Manual 10-2021: Therapy Expectations: Pages 36 and 41.

<sup>67</sup> Margaret Singer, *Cults in Our Midst* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1996), Pages 58 to 59.

The changing phase is then accomplished through mystical manipulation and doctrine over person.

Refreezing, the final phase, is then completed through acceptance of the sacred science and further reinforced by fear concerning the dispensing of existence.

### **Lifespring**

Jean Courtney confirmed that she did Lifespring weekend seminar training and then became more actively involved. She said, "I actually went through a workshop with Lifespring and then a family enrollment person in the Lifespring organization in January of 1979."<sup>68</sup> Ms. Courtney went through three seminars. "There were -- there were three. There was one that was -- two that were five days, and one that were weekends."<sup>69</sup> Ms. Courtney was active with Lifespring from 1978-1980.<sup>70</sup>

Brandon Courtney confirmed that his mother once worked for Lifespring<sup>71</sup> as a "trainer"<sup>72</sup> and that Jean Courtney was leading large group awareness training.<sup>73</sup>

Ms. Courtney is fully aware that Lifespring was shut down due to lawsuits.<sup>74</sup>

There were numerous personal injury lawsuits filed against Lifespring. "Peter Georgiades is a Pittsburgh lawyer who has filed seven cases against Lifespring. Lifespring settled most of those cases, agreeing to pay former trainees if the

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<sup>68</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 12, Lines 2 to 4.

<sup>69</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 13, Lines 8 to 10.

<sup>70</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022 Page 14, Lines 10 to 17.

<sup>71</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 14, Line 1.

<sup>72</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 16, Line 8.

<sup>73</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 18, Lines 15 to 16.

<sup>74</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 15, Lines 15 to 22.

amount was kept confidential. In his cases with no secrecy deal, Georgiades has won settlements of \$100,000 to \$800,000.”<sup>75</sup>

Reportedly, “A Washington lawyer who says he went from the basic course to a psychiatric hospital after he suffered paranoid delusions and threw away all the knives in his house for fear that he would hurt himself. The lawyer spent many months in the hospital and suffered a relapse last year. Lifespring says the lawyer signed a form saying that he knew that the basic might be an emotionally stressful course and that he would not hold the company responsible for any problems.”<sup>76</sup>

Attorneys interviewed by the Washington Post said, “Lifespring [had] been spared several other lawsuits because injured trainees [were] ashamed to reveal that they participated in harsh exercises.”<sup>77</sup>

Ms. Courtney acknowledged that she has used pieces of what she learned at Lifespring for SRA training.<sup>78</sup> She explained that Lifespring is focused “patterns of behavior, the way you think.”<sup>79</sup> And, in parallel, the purpose of similar exercises at SRA is to “look at their patterns of thinking, feeling, and beliefs.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “I cried enough to fill a glass” The Washington Post, October 25, 1987: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1987/10/25/i-cried-enough-to-fill-a-glass/c75b0dda-e8ea-46f9-8aea-8e4afdd0cfbe/> (accessed March 28, 2022).

<sup>76</sup> “I cried enough to fill a glass” The Washington Post, October 25, 1987: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1987/10/25/i-cried-enough-to-fill-a-glass/c75b0dda-e8ea-46f9-8aea-8e4afdd0cfbe/> (accessed March 28, 2022).

<sup>77</sup> “I cried enough to fill a glass” The Washington Post, October 25, 1987: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1987/10/25/i-cried-enough-to-fill-a-glass/c75b0dda-e8ea-46f9-8aea-8e4afdd0cfbe/> (accessed March 28, 2022).

<sup>78</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 18, Line 25.

<sup>79</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 17, Line 18.

<sup>80</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 20, Line 6.

Consistent with the structure of Lifespring, Brandon Courtney described how SRA uses large group<sup>81</sup> awareness<sup>82</sup> training<sup>83</sup> to effect change in its students. These trainings last for consecutive days much like Lifespring.

Brandon Courtney explained that through the training, “We elicit feelings, and what we want to do is have students aware of what feelings come up for them.”<sup>84</sup>

Virginia (Ginni) Lamp Thomas, the wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, once attended Lifespring, but eventually ended her involvement due to concerns about how participants’ feelings were being manipulated during the seminar training. “Thomas told a Washington Post reporter in 1987 that she was confused and troubled by some of Lifespring’s exercises.”<sup>85</sup>

“‘At first Ginni was feeling pretty good and enthusiastic about Lifespring,’ recalls her minister, the Rev. Rodney Wilmoth of Omaha’s St. Paul United Methodist Church, who corresponded with Thomas at the time. ‘But later she was concerned about its influence and began to sense the organization had a cultlike mentality.’”<sup>86</sup>

“I remember Ginni felt manipulated by the group,” Wilmoth said. “She was losing her own freedom of who she was.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 42, Lines 12 to 13.

<sup>82</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 24, Line 9.

<sup>83</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 25, Line 9.

<sup>84</sup> Deposition of Brandon Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 30, Lines 14 to 15.

<sup>85</sup> “The Nominee’s Soulmate,” The Washington Post, September 10, 1991: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/lifespring/main.htm> (accessed March 28, 2022).

<sup>86</sup> “The Nominee’s Soulmate,” The Washington Post, September 10, 1991: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/lifespring/main.htm> (accessed March 28, 2022).

<sup>87</sup> “The Nominee’s Soulmate,” The Washington Post, September 10, 1991: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/lifespring/main.htm> (accessed March 28, 2022).

Reportedly, “It took Thomas months to break fully from Lifespring’s ‘high-pressure tactics,’ she told The Post in 1987. ‘I had intellectually and emotionally gotten myself so wrapped up with this group that I was moving away from my family and friends and the people I work with.’”<sup>88</sup>

### **Cross Creek Manor**

Jean Courtney met her second husband, David Gilcrease, through Lifespring. She said, “I worked with him when I was an enrollment person at Lifespring.”<sup>89</sup> After their divorce in 1988, Ms. Courtney’s former second husband contacted her in 1992<sup>90</sup> about his seminar business “Resource Realizations” and his relationship with Cross Creek Manor in Utah.<sup>91</sup> In Utah, Ms. Courtney collaborated with Gilcrease to do workshops. She describes these workshops as “similar” to those later done at SRA with related activities that were “very similar.”<sup>92</sup>

Ms. Courtney acknowledges that Cross Creek Manor, like Lifespring, was sued. But the lawsuits apparently occurred after she left in 1995 and stopped leading workshops there.<sup>93</sup> However, Ms. Courtney later says she actually did her last workshop at Cross Creek Manor in “1996.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> “The Nominee’s Soulmate,” The Washington Post, September 10, 1991: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/lifespring/main.htm> (accessed March 28, 2022).

<sup>89</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 51, Lines 14 to 15.

<sup>90</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 53, Line 1.

<sup>91</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 52, Lines 5 to 24.

<sup>92</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 53, Lines 11 to 14.

<sup>93</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 53, Lines 18 to 22.

<sup>94</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 56, Lines 1 to 2.

Ms. Courtney acknowledges that David Gilcrease was sued in connection with lawsuits filed against Cross Creek Manor.<sup>95</sup>

Subsequent to ending her work at Cross Creek Manor in 1996, Ms. Courtney began SRA in 1997.<sup>96</sup> Ms. Courtney acknowledges that “to some degree” she used the Cross Creek Manor “seminar model” at SRA.<sup>97</sup>

## Recovery

There have been studies done by researchers investigating the residual effects of authoritarian controlling groups that use coercive persuasion and thought reform techniques to manipulate and control participants. In their book *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, authors Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman reported the results they received from questionnaires distributed to former members of 48 different high-demand groups. The authors noted that “the psychological trauma” high-demand groups may inflict “is directly proportional to the amount of time people spent” in such groups.<sup>98</sup> Conway and Siegelman also reported that “one in five of [their] survey respondents experienced some physical health problems.” One respondent said, “It hurts to think, it physically aches.”<sup>99</sup> Many said they experienced “ongoing problems of confusion, disorientation and disassociation.”<sup>100</sup>

The American Family Foundation also did a study that included more than 300 former members of authoritarian high-demand groups. About 67 percent

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<sup>95</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 56, Lines 13 to 14.

<sup>96</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 57, Lines 10 to 12.

<sup>97</sup> Deposition of Jean B. Courtney February 8, 2022, Page 57, Lines 13 to 20 and Page 58, Lines 2 to 5.

<sup>98</sup> Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, 2nd ed. (New York: Stillpoint Press, 2005), Page 193.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 192.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 187.

experienced emotional disorders including depression, 76 percent were angry with their former leaders, and 83 percent had lower self-confidence.<sup>101</sup>

More specifically, students at schools such as SRA (within what is commonly called the “Troubled Teen Industry” (TTI)) share many of the same post-exit issues as former members of authoritarian high-demand groups. This can be seen as the consequences of using coercive persuasion and thought reform as a means of effecting change.

One study concluded, “Directly after leaving their TTI program, participants indicated they needed therapy, understanding, compassion, empathy, kindness, and parental relationship changes. One of the major themes that stood out about participants’ needs is the desire to be believed, not only regarding the atrocities they experienced while enrolled in a TTI program, but also about who they are as individuals. The majority of participants indicated they now struggle with mental health issues as a direct result of being enrolled in a TTI program. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was most commonly cited and was frequently attributed to the abuse they experienced.”<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusions

My conclusions concerning SRA and its treatment of students (and parents) is that SRA uses coercive persuasion and thought reform techniques in an effort to essentially force its students to change. Apparently, the philosophy of SRA is that the desired ends somehow justify the means. This philosophy seems to permeate SRA and has led to disturbing and often destructive results.

Historically, Jean Courtney drew upon her past experience at Lifespring and Cross Creek Manor, which largely became the foundation for her workshops and

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<sup>101</sup> Paul R. Martin, “Post-Cult Symptoms as Measured by the MCMI before Residential Treatments,” *Cultic Studies Journal* 9, No. 2 (1992), Pages 219 to 250.

<sup>102</sup> “An Exploratory Study on Adult Survivors of the Troubled Teen Industry’s Therapeutic Boarding Schools and Wilderness Programs” by Olivia A. Stull, M.S., University of Kansas, B.A., Arizona State University, Submitted to the graduate degree program in Educational Psychology and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Date Defended: 15 May 2020: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/c00ead86d038c1e648b144b826c9047b/1?p-q-origsite=gscholar&cbl=44156> (accesses March 28, 2022).

seminars. Ms. Courtney essentially created composite seminars and workshops copied from these deeply troubled sources. Her collaboration with David Gilcrease also reflects a similarly troubled source.

Coercive persuasion and thought reform are the basis of the preferred indoctrination process frequently used by destructive authoritarian groups and leaders. This methodology has a long history of damaging people and creating casualties through the harm done by subjecting people to such intense manipulation.

Based upon the often-negative results produced by programs such as SRA, within the context of the Troubled Teen Industry, it is evident that the methodology used by programs such as SRA have not produced meaningful, measurable, positive, long-term results. Instead, programs such as SRA hurt children and their parents.

Evidence-based success requires objectively measured results such as a reduced need for medication regarding anxiety and depression, sustained academic achievement and long-term abstinence concerning substance abuse. These results can be measured objectively over a period of years to substantiate successful results. SRA has no such study of scientifically measurable results.

Instead, SRA has a history of serious complaints from former students and parents, which reflects the harm done by its coercive persuasion and thought reform methodology. But rather than abandon these harmful techniques of persuasion, Brandon Courtney appears intent upon continuing his mother's troubled legacy, despite its history of damaged casualties.

Under penalty of perjury, all opinion and conclusions offered herein are offered to a reasonable degree of professional validity and probability.