

RISKY RANCH

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Breakthrough Foundation were designed by Werner Erhard, and are taken directly from his est program, which gathered both converts and controversy during the '70s with its aggressive message of personal transformation through confrontation, which adherents characterized as enlightenment, and critics called a mind control procedure designed to fleece the gullible of their money.

It's this connection between Werner Erhard, the Breakthrough Foundation and the Western Youth Ranch that has spurred fierce opposition to Edmark's plan. In addition to Bob Atkin, the youth ranch is questioned by a number of local church leaders, including Pastor Ray Lodge of the Faith Baptist Church, as well as groups such as the Lincoln City Drug Task Force.

After months of defending the Breakthrough Foundation, Edmark recently caved, saying the Western Youth Ranch is severing ties to the San Francisco-based foundation. "We want to end the controversy," she says. Instead, she claims her advisory board, which includes a number of Lincoln County residents such as Alan Peterson—the director of the Lincoln County Juvenile Department—will develop its own program to replace the Breakthrough Foundation's. "I'm not committed to Werner or anybody else. I'm committed to kids," says the slight, well-groomed woman with intense deep-set eyes.

But Atkin is skeptical, citing what he says is a pattern of deception on the part of Edmark. "Why should we trust her," he asks. Atkin has a point. The youth ranch's founder—who admits she's gone through a number of est seminars and has sent her two children through the Breakthrough Foundation's program—is still quick to defend the techniques behind est. "The things that he [Erhard] did, or the things that he put together to make up the training, I think came from a lot of different places, just like anybody who puts a training together," Edmark says. "He pulled from a lot of different materials and made up the training."

And she has some places to pull materials from herself. One member of her advisory board is a former est trainer named Landon Carter, who with Erhard developed what became the Breakthrough Foundation's youth program. Another is a 14 year-old named Josh Robbins, whose step-father, Tony Robbins, has made millions pitching his "personal power" video tapes on hour-long paid cable tv commercials, and holding inspirational seminars which feature participants walking bare-foot across hot coals.

"Unless these people completely repudiate the manipulative techniques that go into these trainings, it's still the same thing, whether it's Werner Erhard or Tony Robbins who's taken it into a different direction," says Kevin Garvey a counselor and consultant who went through est training as part of his research on the group at Columbia University. Garvey is also a member of the Cult Awareness Network, an organization devoted to monitoring groups such as Scientology, the Unification Church—also known as Moonies—and est.

The human potential movement caught fire in the '70s. Groups promising to transform and improve your life, such as Scientology and Lifespring, put on seminars—or "trainings"—and sent graduates out to recruit more bodies who could pay the high fees these trainings demanded. One of the best known of these groups, which are sometimes labeled cults, was est. Started by Werner Erhard in the early '70s, the Erhard Seminar Training was a combination of Zen, Dale Carnegie-like positive thinking and self-improvement lessons that sounded like psycho-babble to the uninitiated, and which were delivered by trained speakers in grueling seminars which featured abusive and confrontational leaders, sleep deprivation, infrequent bathroom breaks and repetitive chanting.

Hundreds of thousands of people took the courses, spending up to \$300 dollars each time. In the early '80s, Erhard dropped the controversial est label, changed the name of his organization to Werner Erhard and Associates, and spun off a labyrinth of associated projects. One of these was the non-profit Hunger Project—fronted by singer John Denver (who was once quoted as saying that Werner is God)—and dedicated to ending world hunger by the year 2000. The Hunger Project has been criticized as a thinly disguised effort to shore up Erhard's faltering public image, recruit new members and funnel money into his pocket. It is notable for its failure to actually feed anybody. Another was the Forum, a more-palatable version of the est training aimed at corporate managers.

And another was the Breakthrough Racing, a non-profit corporation formed in 1979 to support Erhard's race car habit.

According to the May/June 1980 issue of *The Graduate Review*, an est newsletter, Breakthrough Racing was formed by Erhard as a non-profit corporation to "research the question, 'What is the communication that will allow people to realize the qualities which they need to discover within themselves to fulfill the opportunity to make the world work for everyone?'" This high minded, and baffling, mission was to be carried out by entering Erhard in a low-level racing series known as Formula Super Vee. Erhard then held a number of seminars to tell people of his wonderful "discoveries," and presented a film version of his triumphs. After that, however, Breakthrough Racing was left

with a tax-exempt status and nothing to do.

In 1980 it reformed itself as the Breakthrough Foundation, with one of its stated goals to "empower the opportunities" of at-risk youth, and thereby provide "a breakthrough in the problem of juvenile delinquency." To this end the corporation copyrighted the phrase "Youth At Risk," and set out to "deliver" its program to communities across the country.

At the heart of the Youth At Risk program is the "technology" developed by Erhard. Known originally as the Teen Training, it was offered as part of his Forum operation. In an est publication titled "60 Hours That Transform Your Life," Erhard is quoted from a speech describing the program. "In the teen training we do a breakthrough process which is done as an activity until you lose control. The power releases when you lose control. At that point [in the process], the trainees have an option of losing control or not, and the 1000 teen-agers who have thus far been through the training all did."

Not everyone is pleased as Erhard with these results. Kevin Garvey says the process is dangerous. "First they disrupt your confidence in logical thinking. Then they put people into a trance state and rework their unconscious. Then they bring people out of the trance state and give them arguments that prove what they were told in the trance state is true," he explains. "You don't have an ethical personality after going through the est training. They take that from you."

The Breakthrough Foundation now distances itself from Erhard, who left the country after the television program 60 Minutes reported shocking allegations that he sexually abused his daughters. In a letter provided by Edmark to critics, the foundation's executive director, Elizabeth Shepard, writes that her organization has no legal or financial ties to any Erhard entity, and while she admits that, "We have used some of Werner Erhard's material to develop Breakthrough Foundation programs," she writes that those programs are not "est", the Forum, or any other non-Breakthrough Foundation programs under a different name." Edmark characterizes the Breakthrough program as a benevolent "conversation," that tells kids it is all right to admit mistakes. "Society tells these kids they are mistakes, we tell them that they just made a mistake," she says.

Yet the consent form required for participants in the Breakthrough program paints anything but a benevolent picture. This document warns that the "Youth at Risk Program and the 5-Day Course can be physically demanding and potentially dangerous." Some of these dangers include "severely upsetting emotions, sensations, and mental disorder during or after the program." Participants can also look forward to "infrequent bathroom breaks," and are told that the "amount of sleep in any given day might be limited to a few hours." For those who are "currently experiencing emotional distress," it is recommended that they "DO NOT participate" in the Youth at Risk program.

Edmark, however, simply calls this program a "wake up call" for troubled kids. She also says she has volunteered at Youth at Risk programs in Phoenix, Arizona, and has found the experience "exhilarating."

It's likely that she has not found her efforts to set up the Western Youth Ranch in Lincoln City as exhilarating. "Whenever they write anything in the papers, they never write about the positive things. They only mention who's against me, not who's for me," she complains.

Edmark exaggerates the point, but she has taken hits in the coastal papers. One of these came after she was quoted in the September 23 Lincoln City *News Guard* saying that the Western Youth Ranch had been tested by the well-respected Boys Town, which for generations has been helping young men out of its program in Nebraska. That statement prompted a letter to the paper from Randal R. Blauvelt, Boys Town public relations director.

"While your newspaper did nothing wrong, I do suspect your reporter was given erroneous information by the Western Youth Ranch, or at best, was given a purposefully misleading statement," Blauvelt writes. "She [Edmark] has made similar erroneous statements before to other newspapers, apparently in an effort to build the Ranch's credibility by using Boys Town highly regarded name....We have previously asked Western Youth Ranch to discontinue the practise of connecting Boys Town's name with theirs."

Edmark says the problem with Boys Town was a result of miscommunication, and she says expects a letter that will clarify the situation.

In fact, Edmark had received a letter as early as May 27 from Karen Freeborough, a site coordinator for Boys Town. In that letter, Freeborough writes that it had come to her attention that the Western Youth Ranch was circulating a brochure claiming affiliation with Boys Town. "You were asked to discontinue the practice and again, we suggest that you honor our request rather than purporting inaccurate information," she states.

Some of Edmark's other claims have been challenged as well. In the September 23 Lincoln City *News Guard* article, Edmark said that a study found that participants in the Breakthrough Foundation's programs achieve a 75% drop in truancy, drop in future crime of 50%, and reduction in drug use of 33%. These claims are disputed.

In April of 1992, Betty Phillips, who holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from Harvard ana-

lyzed four studies done on the Breakthrough Foundation. Phillips worked for the Austin, Texas School district—where the Breakthrough Foundation was pushing hard to set up its Youth at Risk program. Phillips found that the four studies were seriously flawed and unscientific. The one report that did seem better conducted, however, refutes Edmark's claims.

According to Phillips, this report indicates that participants were more likely to be absent from school, more likely to receive failing grades and more likely to drop out after going through the Breakthrough course. This report also found a slight increase in crime—instead of a 50% drop. None of the reports tracked drug use, although Phillips determined that there was a rise in pregnancies among participants. It was soon after this document surfaced in Lincoln City that Edmark said she was breaking ties to the Breakthrough foundation. Edmark, however, dismisses Phillips' report. "She was invited to go to one of the trainings," Edmark says of Phillips, "and she didn't." Further, Edmark claims a program in Portland, called the Committed Partners for Youth, held a program at Binnsmead Middle School, at SE 87th Ave., using the Breakthrough Foundation's "technology" with great success.

Despite her setbacks, Edmark is still adamantly pushing her Western Youth Ranch. She's recently opened a Lincoln City office in addition to her office in Portland, and says she can count on supporters. Along with the Juvenile Department's Peterson, she cites Mona Glode, the director of student services for the Lincoln County School District, Robert Eaton, general manager of The Inn at Otter Crest, Fada D'Ambosio, general manager of the Inn at Spanish Head—who both like the idea of hiring trained workers at their hotels—as well as Portlanders Linda Ladd-Harrington of Harrington Executive Clothiers and Pat Lockhart of Ex-colodge Corporation.

And Edmark also say she has philosophical support of "personal power" guru Tony Robbins, who she says dropped by Lincoln City unexpectedly to check out potential sites. "Tony's not involved," Edmark says. "But he's told me he supports the ranch." According to Bob Atkins, Edmark has claimed Robbins would be a source of possible financial support.

Atkin himself is feeling beleaguered. "I wish they'd just go away," he says. "This whole thing has been very disruptive to the community. There are people I used to work with who I can't even talk to anymore."

Ray Lodge, the Baptist pastor who has spoken out against the ranch, says he's gotten harassing calls at home after his statements appeared in the local paper. "On the day it came out, I received four harassing calls. They said I was anti-Semitic, anti-youth and an ego-maniac. It is beyond a doubt a polarizing thing. There are people really pushing for this thing that I have worked with in the past. I would have a problem working with these people ever again," he says.

Atkins remembers his first pitch from Edmark. "It sounded like a this company I once applied to work for. I answered a blind ad for salesmen, and they put me through a training course on how to pressure and con the customer into buying encyclopedias. It stunk, and I walked." That company was the Grolier Society, later found guilty in California of fraudulent sales practices.

Not surprisingly, one of the people training Grolier salesmen was Werner Erhard.

This story first appeared in Portland's PDXS newspaper.

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