

NEWS & OPINION

Volume 14, Issue 54
Published May 2nd, 2007

But Now I'm Found

A Teen Starts a New Life Outside the Insular Sect In Which She Was Raised

By Dan Harkins 

Before Stelli Carmichael bolted from her grand family home in Fairview Park last December, other members of the fundamentalist sect in which she'd been raised seemed to know she was leaving. A young relative approached her that night and said in a ghostly whisper, "Stelli, if you go, someone in the church will die. You don't want that, do you?" Another, a boy about her age, said that it would be him who would die.

She didn't want anyone's life cut short; that's why she was leaving. So, with her house still crammed full of family and friends celebrating her 18th birthday, Stelli slipped out the side door at midnight and disappeared into the wickedness of Greater Cleveland. They'd told her she'd be swallowed whole. She'd take her chances.

"But they knew where to find her," says 26-year-old Justin Stang, the boyfriend to whom Stelli fled.



love conquers all - Stelli Carmichael now lives with boyfriend Justin Stang.

Soon members of Stelli's insular religious community, the Exclusive Brethren, were pounding on the front and side doors of Stang's modest mustard-colored house on the approach path to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. Stelli, not two hours free, peeked through the curtains: Twenty members of her family and sect stood silently near the street, waiting for her to change her mind.

"They were just standing out there in a line, staring at the house," Stelli recalls. "It was creepy."

Eventually, the couple called police, who told her family to leave. But almost every day after that for two months, usually late at night, a knock would jar the door to Stang's house. Quite a few times, Stelli says, it was her dad, who had to say goodbye forever to his oldest daughter because of his standing as a Cleveland leader of the secretive Christian sect, one that lives a modified Amish-like existence but does so right down the street from Brook Park strip clubs and urban decay.

"We talked to my dad a few days later at the police station, and he told me, "You're "shut up," Stelli," she recalls, referring to the sect's practice of shunning drifting members. She shrugs her shoulders, cocks her little-doll head to the side. "He tried to get me to stay, he said the family was planning a trip to Australia to stay at Bruce Hales's house [the Brethren's spiritual leader] and that I should go too."

Hales has a son of marrying age, too.

"They were trying to set us up, I know that's what they were trying to do," Stelli recalls. "I would've gone and I wouldn't have come back. I'd have been locked up for life."

SINCE ITS FOUNDING in the late-19th century in Dublin, Ireland, the Exclusive Brethren sect has grown to about 40,000 worldwide, anchored mostly in and around Australia. They raise their children to stay, marry among themselves. A recent survey by Australia's University of Monash found that of more than 10,000 Australian children born into the church, nearly 96 percent remained into adulthood.

In their eyes, the world outside their factory-style churches is as wicked as the imagination can provide, Stelli says, and must be viewed with fear and contempt. "None of the churches anywhere have any windows," she says. "If they buy a building and there's windows, they'll take them out."

Members aren't allowed TVs. Computers were recently let in but only for business and schools. Radios and novels and things like amusement parks are still banned,


FIND IT AROUND
HERE NOW.


SEARCH

we know around here **superpages.com**

ADVERTISE WITH US


Story Tools

 [Email this story to a friend](#)

 [Printer-friendly version of this story](#)

Other recent stories

[But Now I'm Found](#) May 2nd, 2007

By Dan Harkins 

[Chatter - the Unforgettable](#) May 2nd, 2007

[Letters](#) May 2nd, 2007

[Chatter - Roast Beast](#) April 25th, 2007



The Lofts at



ROCKPORT
SQUARE

rockportsquare.com ▶

Pre-selling Lofts
Mid \$180's-Upper 400's

though car phones (cords and all) are making their way around the male business owners. But most of the core rules are intact. No eating or conversations with "worldlies" outside the scope of commerce. Women can work in the family business until marriage, at which time they must stay home and care for their families. None goes to college. They attend church services every day, on Sundays from morning until dusk. And they work only for family businesses, securing a financial network stretching across the globe.

"That's how they get you," Stelli says. "Not only can't you see your family again [if you leave], but you've got your business all tied up with the Brethren. If you leave the church you lose your business, too. The church provides so much for everybody. It gives the mortgages, car loans. Everything. And they don't want you to even talk to anybody. You could be at the mall and if you said to somebody, "Oh, your baby's adorable. What's her name?", somebody would say, "Shut up, what are you doing?""

Husbands who are put under "assembly discipline" are made to live separately from their wives and children for months at a time. The children aren't told exactly what their fathers have done. "One guy, his wife was pregnant and he didn't even know what she named it," Stelli recalls of a recent example. "He came back and was like, "Nice baby. What's her name?"

Historically, the group has had a strict prohibition against voting. But its new leader, Hales, has allowed the group to throw its support behind conservative political candidates.

Just before the 2004 presidential election, according to The St. Petersburg Times, a group called the Thanksgiving 2004 Committee ran full-page ads in Florida papers in support of Senate candidate Mel Martinez, a gay marriage foe, as well as other ads elsewhere supporting President Bush's reelection. The group registered with the IRS just after the date that would have made it disclose the origins of the money used to buy the ads. Later, a map store owner told the Times that the committee was a group of Brethren, and it was later learned that more than half of the \$600,000 the committee raised came from a moneyed Brethren member from London. A Federal Elections Commission spokesperson said at the time that that violated the law, but no action has been taken.

Stelli was taking part that year. She says most Brethren were working behind the scenes. She was made to volunteer by making hours and hours of campaign calls for U.S. Sen. Mike DeWine and Ken Blackwell's unsuccessful campaigns for God and country.

STELLI WAS SECLUDED from everything but worship and family. She was raised in a community of about 200 Brethren in Tennessee until 2001, when her family moved the seven kids to Cleveland so that Stelli's younger sister could be treated at the Cleveland Clinic.

Stelli was raised to follow the rules: No cutting her hair or wearing makeup. Long skirts at all times in public, long head scarves to church. Her last year of school, in which three teachers taught a variety of subjects for kids young and old, the local church finished work on a permanent bleak-looking school building that used to house a Brethren business near the Berea Recreation Center.

"It's not an accredited school," Stelli says. "But they said it's doesn't matter because wherever I worked it'd be okay for them."

She met Justin Stang while still attending the sect's private school in a tiny trailer in the parking lot of the Brethren-owned pump business where Justin worked. She picked up some secretarial work at the business after school. He remembers overhearing Stelli and a schoolmate refer to their fellow Brethren as "weird," and adds, "I knew then that she was different from the rest of them." It was furtive glances and stolen phone calls and quick secret visits after that.



Down to business - The nondescript church of Cleveland's Exclusive Brethren.

Before she turned 18, when her father forbid her to see Justin and he was subsequently fired from his job, Stelli was sent to live with family in Iowa, where a young man her age, who liked bodybuilding and other things she could care less about, had aims to make her his wife. She wasn't interested.

"There's not much to choose from" in the Brethren community, she says.

In Cleveland, there are about 100 Brethren; in Columbus, another 100. Each weekend, one of the two groups drives to the other city for day-long services and study, during which, as always, the women will sit in the back with the children and only the men will discuss the Scripture down front.



The Exclusive Brethren of Cleveland meet in a windowless brown brick box a short distance off Grayton Road, in a residential neighborhood near the airport. No sign advertises its services. Last Saturday, the parking lot was empty except for three late-teen girls in a newer model van. I identify myself as a reporter and ask how I can reach Bruce Carmichael. The girl who's driving starts to give directions to the Carmichael home, but the girl in the passenger seat stops her, gives me a cell phone number instead.

"Definitely give him a call before you do anything," she warns sternly.

"OK. Sure."

I tell the girls I'm working on a story about the Brethren, particularly Stelli's decision to leave it.

"She talked to you?" the driver asks.

"Yes." And the girls' eyes double in size.

Knocks on the door at Carmichael's home went unanswered. After several phone messages, Carmichael called back Monday to say that he was going to be too busy to talk until late in the week and suggested sending a letter to his address. "I don't really know what this is about," he said in the message he left, even though I'd told him in two of the messages.

Stelli said she'd be surprised if he or any of the Brethren talked. Even Hales doesn't do interviews.

And "something like this, it makes the family look bad," Stelli says.

But Stelli doesn't look the least bit sympathetic today, clad in a denim mini-skirt and halter top as she bounces through her and Stang's house with painted toe nails and that beauty mark on her cheek touched up with a pencil. Some days, she confesses, she hasn't done anything but watch South Park and The Jerry Springer Show. But little memories are piling up. Getting her ears pierced. Her first paycheck (as a waitress) "that I actually got to keep." Her driver's license.

"We went to the I-X Indoor Amusement Park" — the type of worldly recreation she's been raised to believe was wicked — "and it was just a whole bunch of people running around having fun with their kids. It's ridiculous."

She'd like to move on in a more concerted way, maybe move somewhere apart from her still-prying past, but her father still stands silently in her way. She says he owes her about \$16,000 he long ago promised he'd start putting aside for her when she began working for his national salt-spreader business at around 14. When she left the family and the church, she says, he changed the name on the account to his. She'd like to get her GED and start college too, but to get financial aid, she'll need a parent's signature to become an independent student. She'll have to find her own way.

"I don't think I'm ever gonna get the money or the signature," she says. "But I'm free."

dharkins@freetimes.com

[Email story](#) | [Print story](#)

[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [MUSIC](#) | [ARTS](#) | [DINING](#) | [FILM](#) | [FREESTYLE](#)

[Promotions](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Advertising Info](#) | [Contact Us!](#)

© 2007 The Cleveland Free Times: 800 W. St. Clair Avenue – 2nd Floor, Cleveland, OH 44113-1266, (216) 479-2033. Logos and trademarks on this site are property of their respective owners.