

## 2018 HIDDEN CHICAGO

# Growing Up in the Order

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BY ANONYMOUS

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**M**y parents used to tell me a story from when I was little: I once woke up in the middle of the night, sleepwalked down the hall, and climbed right into bed with a couple who lived on our floor. The woman phoned my parents in the morning and said, “Don’t worry, she’s with us.” No one thought anything of it.

Everybody knew everybody in our building in those days—this was the ’80s—and no one locked their doors. There weren’t many doors to lock, since we were living in an old office building, and most of the rooms were just enclosures created by putting up flimsy drywall or, in the early days, moving around the filing cabinets left behind by the previous occupants. We were maybe a few dozen families living in the hulking eight-story edifice, which stood at Lawrence and Sheridan and had once been owned by the Kemper insurance company.

This was the headquarters of the Order: Ecumenical, as our religious organization was called. We all ate together in a big dining hall on the

sixth floor. The food was government-issued. Sometimes, when members of the group from outside Chicago were visiting, we'd get treated to a big French toast breakfast, but most of the time it was processed cheese, white bread, and spaghetti with canned tomato sauce. We ate a lot of spaghetti.

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Poverty wasn't so much a solemn vow as an accepted circumstance, given that when I was little, most of the grownups in the Order, my parents included, didn't have regular occupations. Those who did—for the most part women working as secretaries or nurses—were expected to turn over the bulk of their salaries to the Order. This lack of money made us kids industrious about earning our own cash, starting at an early age. My first-ever job, when I was about 10, was operating our building's manual elevator on Saturdays.

What was the Order's mission? In the parlance of the group's leaders, it was to live the active life of Christ, to turn his teachings into action. Looking back on it now, though, I guess I'd say we were more a community organization than a religious order. By the time I was born, the group's founder, a divinity professor from Texas named Joe Mathews who'd started the sect with some fellow theologians in the '50s, had died, and the religious component of our everyday life had been whittled down to a half-hour morning observance we called the daily office. I only remember that it began with "Holy, holy, holy." I'm told those were the first words I ever spoke.

Lots of people hear the terms "commune" or "sect" and think of a radical cult that has sequestered itself in the woods or the desert, or maybe some conservative offshoot of the church that bans dancing and music, but the Order wasn't like that at all. For one thing, we were in the middle of a huge city, not in the middle of nowhere, and more important, we weren't interested in separating ourselves from other people. Just the opposite, in fact. The group's work consisted of

building schools and training community leaders and teachers in the city's poor neighborhoods, mostly on the West Side. The members of the Order were good at what they did, and one of the preschools they built, in East Garfield Park, is still there. My sister and I both attended it. Aside from a handful of other Order kids, we were the only white students.



From left: The author (left) and her sister standing in front of one of the Order's shared vehicles outside the group's former headquarters, at Lawrence and Sheridan; the author at age 9, in India; the Order's building today. PHOTOGRAPHY: (CHILDHOOD) COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR; (BUILDING) COURTESY OF THE INSTITUTE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

At the time, I didn't think my life was all that strange. I mean, I didn't have to wear long-sleeved dresses or bonnets or anything like that. But when I brought friends over for the first time, they were always like, "What the fuck *is* this place?" Our building was immense and labyrinthine, and we had the run of the place. We found unused rooms that adults never set foot in, and we had access to the basement, which occupied the whole footprint of the building and became a huge cement-floored playground, perfect for hide-and-seek and—by the time

I was in high school—drinking, smoking, and fooling around. The parenting philosophy in the Order might best be summed up as “total freedom until something goes wrong.” After all, that’s how a lot of the adults had been brought up, too.

One of the things that surprise folks the most about my childhood is how much of it was spent far away from my parents. When I was 9 years old, I went by myself to India for four months to live with another family that belonged to the Order, which ran community building projects in countries all over the world. When I was 11, I left home again, to live in Australia. No one thought this was unusual. Going to live abroad at a young age was just what you did. It was part of your education, part of being a full human being. My mom grew up in the Order—her father was a Methodist minister who’d joined in the early ’60s—and traveled as a kid, just like I did. My father, who grew up in Australia, stumbled on some Order members there as a teenager, and before long was on his way to India, which is where my parents got married.

The funny thing is, we didn’t stand out as much as you might think in Uptown. It was, and still is, a neighborhood full of activists, immigrants, outsiders, and eccentrics. There were lots of cheap apartments for newcomers and all kinds of community organizations and mutual aid societies to help them: The Chicago Southern Center, which worked with migrants from Appalachia, was just up the street, and there was a Hull House office, a Students for a Democratic Society branch, and the Montrose Urban Progress Center, among others. There were also lots of gangs and drug dealers.

What may be most remarkable about the Order was how big it was at its peak. By the mid-’70s, members of the Order, working through a nonprofit they’d created called the Institute of Cultural Affairs, were conducting projects in virtually every time zone in the world, and the nonprofit’s worldwide membership had grown to nearly 3,000 people. Not only did Order families occupy most of the Kemper building, but thanks in part to my grandfather, who held a prominent role in the

Order and helped persuade Kemper to donate the property to the group's nonprofit arm in 1971, they effectively owned it.

Today the Order: Ecumenical no longer exists as a religious entity. By the late 1980s, it had been formally dissolved, and the work of the ICA was being carried out by former Order families and by new staffers, many with no ties to the religious group. Though the ICA now rents out most of the Kemper building as offices to nonprofit groups, the organization is still headquartered there, and a few of the families from my time are still residents, most of them clustered on the seventh floor. The current mission of the ICA is, to quote its website, "to build a just and equitable society in harmony with Planet Earth through empowering cultural dimensions of the social process." So maybe a little more New Agey than before, but basically the same.

Today I'm a corporate attorney living in the South Loop, and I lead a life pretty typical of an urban professional. Most of the kids I grew up with have gone out into the world and found livelihoods, too. Some are engineers, some run nonprofits, some are teachers. Even my dad eventually left the Order and thrived, starting a data management company with other members of the group who were based in India and Hong Kong.

Some people might be surprised at how naturally I made the transition from cheap pasta in the dining hall of a religious commune to a lucrative professional career, and most of the people I work with would never guess where or how I grew up. But when I think about it, the Order made me who I am today. It taught me to be self-sufficient, it taught me how to thrive in almost any kind of environment, and it certainly taught me the value of a dollar. I miss the Kemper building and think about my time there almost every day. And believe it or not, spaghetti with tomato sauce is still my favorite meal.

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