

# From the Ashes

The Phoenix Project aims to help former cult followers through art, music and literature.

Michael Wolloghan talks with the organisation's director.

Creating art can be therapeutic for people recovering from destructive cults. The negative after-effects of cults cannot be underestimated, and artistic self-expression can help people to resolve problems, reduce anxiety, depression and increase self-esteem.

Diana Pletts, MA, directs and coordinates the Phoenix Project, an art exhibition that showcases challenging, imaginative work done by ex-cult members. While the success and acclaim of the exhibition is often overlooked by the mass media, it still continues to receive tremendously positive reviews.

I spoke with Diana about the Project, her remarkable past and the ability of art to enthrall, to capture a moment in time and to take us to places we've never been.

**Q** *Firstly, could you please tell me about the origins of the Phoenix Project – how did it come about?*

**A** The Phoenix Project really was a result of my time at Wellspring. [Wellspring Retreat is an accredited residential counseling center specializing in the treatment of individuals who have suffered in abusive cults.] Dr Martin [the director of Wellspring] encouraged me to reacquire myself with my artistic pre-cult self. Afterward, when I returned to college to complete my undergraduate degree, following my time at Wellspring,

somehow the photography class and the philosophy of the arts class just worked together with my recollections of what Dr Martin had said, and I thought that perhaps the arts could be a good tool to help ex-members to communicate the reality of their cult affiliation to the outside world. My hope was that, as a result of this communication, there might be additional places for ex-members to go in order to get cult-specific counseling, and additional funding as well, to assist ex-members to get the help that they needed.

So, to me, the Phoenix Project was communication with a goal: the ex-member communicating his or her reality to an uncomprehending world and, hopefully, a response from that world to assist this generally unseen yet often hurting and often struggling person.

**Q** *What do you believe are the benefits of art for ex-cult members?*

**A** My sense is that art itself is a benefit to ex-members first of all by the simple virtue of communicating their experience to someone else, not unlike the therapy experience. In this case, however, one is communicating to more than one person, so the hope is for a greater impact with this increased audience. I understand that the therapist is an audience in a very different sense, with a different goal.

Next, in the creation process, there is the satisfaction of seeing something produced, of having a concrete finished product. Having a finished product is healing because so much of one's group experience is in one's head. Someone

hearing me speak about my group experience said it sounded exhausting; and it was - constant, relentless, internal. So having produced something external to one's self is a pleasure.

Another positive aspect of producing art that might have to do with therapy (and note that I am not a psychologist, so this is speculation) is the notion of being able to see the particular problem as being outside of one's self. In responding to a problem by creating a particular artwork, whether visual, musical or literary, and placing it out there for view, in a very literal sense, one has externalised it.

I think that the sense of being able to communicate and also to externalise one's conception of what happened, must be helpful and healthful.

But, finally, the production of something might also be healing because you are breaking your group's taboo in several ways. First, by speaking out or writing or creating a work of art at all, in a sense one is telling tales out of school, telling the truth of what happened, breaking the "don't feel, don't talk" taboo.

Next, if one's group was, as was mine, against the use of the arts, saying that it is egotistical and likely to lead to spiritual death, then to act in a manner contrary to those dictates is an act of righteous rebellion and, I would argue, freeing.

But Dr Martin also saw the value of the individual - he celebrated diversity in nature, and believed it to be important for the individual to be allowed diversity of expression, as well - to not be clones. So, too, the Phoenix Project is a celebration of the return of the individual, and is a rebellion against the cultic notion of the necessity of the death of the self, the destruction of individuality, and the creation of clones.

In a sense the Phoenix Project is an event appropriately honoring Dr. Martin, for his assistance to me, and to many others, in the retrieval and resurrection of our unique, creative selves.

**Q** *You're an ex-member of The Path, an apocalyptic Christian sect. How did art help you overcome the trauma of being involved in that group?*



**A** I don't know that I would say that art helped me overcome that trauma - getting exit counseled and getting help at Wellspring helped me, as did the love and care of my husband and children, among other family and friends. Also, completing college and attempting to help with the cult recovery movement.

The artwork I have produced has answered the call, or the items I have previously mentioned - the feeling that I am talking out of school, speaking up and not being silent about the abuse that occurred, and therefore shedding light on a situation. Also the sense of seeing some of my issues externalised.

I would say, however, that sometimes when I have created a work of art or writing, the completed work has helped me to better understand that particular aspect of my cult situation. For example, I did a painting representing my conceptualisation of the results of the so-called 'healings' - more truthfully 'harmings' - from my group, as I saw them during the time of my recovery. Seeing them on the canvas helped to depict them to others, and gave me a better sense of what they were for me, as well.

Also, sometimes someone else sees it and responds, and comments, and their comments help me to understand that aspect in a new or better way.

And, of course, my interaction with the artwork of others helps me to gain a better grasp of some aspects of cult affiliation and of their situations.

Finally, the act of creation has helped in terms of regaining my individuality, especially by going against our group dictates telling the artistic among us not to be the way we were created. Pretty much in my group the notion was that anything you wanted or liked was likely to be the opposite of what 'God' wanted for you, so one was always enjoined to step away from what was desired, and to embrace that which was not.

**Q** *Do you find the production of the art, how you feel while making it, is of more importance than its final form?*

**A** No - really not. For me art is about



**Left: One of Diana Pletts, director and coordinator of the Phoenix Project, own liberating artworks, appropriately of a phoenix.**

I have found it a wonderful pleasure and delight to work on the Phoenix Project, bringing together people's works, getting to read and view and hear them and trying to come up with a way to showcase them. I find it very exciting to be able to interact with the creators and find a way to get their works out there. Opening the boxes and files is like Christmas!

communication. It is my attempt to have someone else have a better understanding of what I am trying to get across. It really is not about releasing anything other than the image or concept I am trying to convey.

**Q** *When was the first public appearance of the Phoenix Project?*

**A** The Phoenix Project debuted at the ICSA (International Cultic Studies Association) conference in Denver in 2006. We had over two dozen participants from several countries and a number of different groups, and it was well received. It consisted of an exhibit room, and two sessions of sharing in readings, video and music created by ex-members. The exhibit room presented visual art works in two and three dimensions, literary works and a music score. The Phoenix Project was held again on a smaller scale in Brussels, Belgium, in 2007 and again in 2008 in Philadelphia, with a very large number of participants from the international scene, including multiple works by various artists, and a 'Wall of Pain' of literary contributions. Three musicians shared their cult-related compositions with us as well.

The Phoenix Project will take place again this year at the ICSA conference outside of NYC in early July, and is again looking for works by ex-members or those raised in cults, which will help to shed light on the life of cult and ex-cult members and their recovery.

**Q** *What are your future goals and ambitions for the Phoenix Project?*

**A** A future hope for the Phoenix Project is that it will someday take place at times and places other than the annual ICSA conference, so that people other than those already close to the cult recovery world would become informed about this reality.

Another dream is that of putting together a book of works by the participants, with some commentary, again, for the same reasons as that already mentioned - that others might know, and in knowing might care to help relieve those under bondage to their cult leaders and mindsets.

**Q** *How can ex-cult members get in contact with you if they wish to contribute?*

**A** They can e-mail me at [exmemberartwork@yahoo.com](mailto:exmemberartwork@yahoo.com). Participants need not be present at exhibitions, they may be anonymous or use a pseudonym, and may send a jpeg attachment of the work. All rights are retained by the artist. Hopefully we can help others to understand some of the realities of cult affiliation. ■



About the author

**Michael Wolloghan** is a member of the NSW committee of Australian Skeptics and an investigator of cults and strange religions.