

Trying to understand why hundreds drank the poison

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VanDeCarr, co-producer/director of a documentary-in-progress, "After Jonestown." Panelists were Nina Berry, a former Peoples Temple member who is now a mental health counselor in Oakland; Jim Jones Jr., the minister's adopted black son; Stephan Jones, biological son of Jim and Marceline Jones, and the Rev. Arnold Townsend, former executive director of the Western Addition Project Area Committee.

The program began with a screening of a demonstration reel of "After

PHOTOS BY MARK ELLINGER



About 250 people at the Main Library bear the Nov. 19 public forum and remembrance, "Jonestown 25 Years Later: A Look Back."

Jonestown," a 10-minute film clip perhaps put together to attract financial backing. It was real enough to set a somber tone.

Somewhere toward the end of the two-hour session, Donnetter Lane, a black woman in her 70s and a 30-year community activist, cracked a joke. "Let me say about San Francisco," she observed, "it's an unusual place." As understatement goes, it wasn't particularly original. But it brought down the house anyway in a sustained round of applause. The response had less to do with Lane's incisive wit and more with the rising tensions as this group of people, mostly unknown to each other, tried to grapple with the grim question of Jonestown.

"You meet your neighbor today," she continued, "and tomorrow that neighbor is gone. High mobility is the name of the game in San Francisco. Most people come here to get, and when they get it, they leave."

What Lane was reaching for was an explanation of how Jim Jones, a white minister from Indiana, had come to San Francisco and captivated the black people of the Western Addition and led them off to enforced bondage in Guyana, and, ultimately, death. It was, in fact, what the entire evening was about.

Her explanation was succinct. "We came here from everywhere and, as a product of a new community [that was only established] after World War II, we didn't get to know each other then. Jim Jones came in and started dealing with these dilemmas [chiefly racism] and began putting things together."

Indeed, the Fillmore provided a ready supply of housing stock for African American workers hired by the shipbuild-

ing industry at the start of World War II. It had been the chief Japanese American neighborhood until those residents were sent off to camps. The shipbuilders transformed the Fillmore into a viable black neighborhood, the then-white-majority-city's first.

By the 1960s, with property values rising, some people had figured a way to at least blunt, if not eradicate, the black presence in the Fillmore. It was called the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency and its handiwork can be seen any day by taking the 38-Geary west. Starting at Gough, with the Roman Catholic cathedral on the left and high-rise luxury housing condominiums on the right, both sides of Geary show the effect of the Redevelopment Agency all the way to Fillmore and beyond to Divisadero Street. The housing, projects, the Japantown Mall, the AMC Kabuki 8 movie house, were once mostly privately owned housing, much of it in the hands of black people.

Panelist Townsend was the chief community leader opposing the Redevelopment Agency's destruction of the Fillmore neighborhood. He called it one of the most progressive neighborhoods in the city, "the backbone of the so-called liberal political machine in San Francisco."

Townsend described the Fillmore's political climate, pre-Jonestown. "Unlike today," he asserted, the people were "voting in high numbers, always voting to the left side of everything. They were voting to the left side of San Francisco, which was to the left of everything else."

Townsend explained how Peoples Temple attracted great numbers of activists who were veterans of the battle against redevelopment. "These were some very progressive people," Townsend told the audience. But once they joined Peoples Temple "they were only active if Peoples Temple was active, and not as individuals, as they had been before."

Seemingly working in tandem, though Townsend was quick to assure the audience he was not suggesting any conspiracy, "What Jonestown and redevelopment did was destroy and disrupt one of the most politically active communities. The heart of the community was completely ripped out."

"They took almost a thousand folks out of the Fillmore and moved them to Guyana," and their death. In the aftermath, Townsend said, "One of the reasons we see the malaise of political activity, especially in the African American community, is that people say, 'What's the use? See what political activism gets you!' That's one of the real tragedies of Jonestown — a political tragedy — besides the personal tragedies."

One of the first statements from the audience was by an unidentified black woman: "I don't believe there was a thorough investigation [into the Temple and the suicides] and I think that racism played an enormous part in that."

The young woman's assertion was for the most part accurate. There wasn't even a partial investigation into Jonestown.

Many allude to a possible CIA cover-up behind the lack of investigation. Precisely what the CIA had to gain, or for that matter, what it had to cover up, has never been established. While the agency knew a leftist congregation had taken residence in a socialist country, it's remarkably unclear why it should care. But people blame the CIA out of habit.

Responses to the woman's statement confirmed that the money collected from the Temple's various international bank accounts was distributed to surviving rela-

tives. A subsequent statement made by Stanford Professor Philip Zimbardo alluded to the amount being \$7 million. No one here challenged his number.

How a congregation that had recently uprooted itself to a foreign country — paying the airfare for hundreds of people, shipping enormous cargo crates by sea and buying the materials to construct dozen of buildings — could have accumulated so much surplus capital fuels the CIA rumor.

FOSTER CARE SCAM

The likelihood is the money came from the state Department of Social Services that was running foster care homes. Substantial revenue streamed to the Temple from the eight to 10 foster care operations run by Temple members. Then, as now, there was a tremendous need to place young black children in foster care but not enough homes were available. As a result, state scrutiny of these care homes was minimal. Temple couples operating the homes would sign the monthly stipend checks for each child over to the church. The kids were fed in communal kitchens and warehoused in Temple properties

"I hated my father. I hated him before Jonestown and even more after Jonestown."

Stephan Jones

This information was provided to this reporter by Debbie Latham, the Temple's treasurer, several months before the suicides and made available to state child welfare officials. Of the nearly 300 children who died in Guyana, it is likely that nearly 200 were wards of the state at the time. In this case, it is fairly certain that racism was not at the heart of why it was never investigated.

A 30-something man in the audience asked how the Temple, which panelists described as a place of brotherhood and equality that provided a sense of belonging and family, had morphed into a group where the endgame became "revolutionary suicide."

In trying to respond, the panelists depicted an utter lack of communication, a kind of social isolation, which existed in the midst of the giant congregation. Combined with a fervent sense of community and kinship, this isolation coerced Peoples Temple members into going along with Jones' increasingly erratic strategies, even when they violated common sense.

Nina Berry lost six members of her family at Jonestown, including her 8-year-old sister. Berry was 12 at the time.

"My grandmother was the head of our family and she was searching for a greater level of social community and brotherhood," Berry explained. Jim Jones seemed to offer this within a Christian framework and, gradually, people like Berry's family surrendered their wills. "If he said it was going to rain tomorrow, they would come in with umbrellas because they believed him and they gave him their trust. "In the back of their heads, if they were thinking that this isn't right, you would never, never know it, because they weren't going to tell you."

In an interview afterward, Berry told a

Chronicle reporter, "My family wasn't poor." But, she told the audience, "They had given him everything, so they had nothing. Wherever he was leading them, they followed. They'd given up their valuables, they'd given up their homes, they had turned their backs on their [other] family members ..."

A SON'S LAMENT

Stephan Jones explained this isolation from a more personal point of view. He started out confessing, "I hated my father. I hated him before Jonestown and even more after Jonestown."

And yet he stayed with the church because of his mother, whom Jones abused, and his friends. Stephan was in the Guyana capital of Georgetown for a basketball game with Guyana's national team that had been arranged much earlier. "If I had taken the poison," he said at one point, "it would have been because I didn't want to look like a coward to the only people who mattered in my world."

"I could be in a room full of people," he explained, "thinking 'This is crazy, this is nuts.' [Jones'] overriding message was 'How could you be so selfish.' So that was always working me. I must be selfish because I'm the only one in the room who thinks this is crazy."

"[Yet] while I'm thinking this is crazy, I'm waving my hands and I'm into it by all appearances. And I'm looking around the room where everybody else is doing the same thing. Now what was probably happening is that three-quarters or half the people in the room are doing what I was doing [pretending they believed while at the same time they didn't]."

"But because I didn't have the strength and the wherewithal [to resist], I'd give myself up. What I believed and what felt right for me had no bearing, because everybody else [it seemed] saw it differently."

Jim Jones Jr. was also in Guyana's capital on the day of the suicides. He had been sent there to do public relations with the Guyana government. More and more questions were being raised by parents and loved ones in the United States concerning the Temple mission and the manner in which members were treated.

Speaking to the sense of solidarity Temple members felt for each other, Jones Jr. postulated: "When that first person stepped up and drank the Kool Aid, even though I may have not agreed, even though I may have not wanted to make that decision, how could I let a fellow brother or sister make that decision and not be supportive. It's very clear in my mind when you have a sense of belonging, a sense of community, you would die for your brother and sister."

A world of difference exists



Panelists at

"Jonestown 25 Years Later" included, from left, Paul VanDeCarr, co-moderator and co-producer/director of the documentary "After Jonestown"; co-moderator Cynthia Selmar, director of the African American Health Initiative; the Rev. Arnold Townsend, former executive director of the Western Addition Project Area Committee; former Peoples Temple member Nina Berry, a mental health counselor in Oakland; Stephan Jones, Jim and Marceline Jones' biological son; and Jim Jones Jr., their adopted son.

between dying to save your brother or sister and killing yourself or your children just because they killed themselves. And it was near the end of this encounter when the distinction was made crystal clear.

Co-moderator VanDeCarr made what in one context could have been a ridiculous understatement, "I think one thing people have a hard time coming to understand is that moment of decision. Am I going to kill myself? Am I going to kill my children?"

Stephan Jones' response was he would enthusiastically wave his arms around while not actually believing when his father was preaching. Then he told a story he apparently gleaned from the "White Night" tapes about "a young, proud, black man" named Pancho Johnson who had great respect for Marceline Jones, Stephan's mother.

When the suicides began, "My mother resisted the poisoning until the last child died and then walked up and took the poison herself. But while she was resisting, she was restrained, and Pancho Johnson jumped up to defend her, because he would not have this woman he revered handled that way."

"And because he resisted, he was on the spot, by my father, ordered to drink the poison. Without blinking an eye, he turned and walked up to the vat and took the poison."

Stephan paused for a second. "It's a loss beyond comparison," he lamented. "He had so much to offer. But I want to remember also the courage and commitment of that act."

AN UNSUNG HERO

It was at this point that Zimbardo, the Stanford psychology professor, stood up, and in an effort to contrast what Stephan Jones had just related, told the story of "an unsung hero of Jonestown." Identifying the young man as Richard Clark, he called

him "an uneducated, poor black tailor from Los Angeles, who led an escape on the morning of the massacre."

"What he did that the other 1,000 people there didn't do was to think critically. "He went there hoping for a new life and he had seen all the propaganda films. 'It's a paradise. People are getting watermelons. Everything is growing.'"

"And when he got there — after the 10-hour horrible trip in the boat, where everybody's vomiting — when he gets there he's expecting to see smiles. There were no smiles. He said friends were grim and then you had to give up your passport, all your money, everything. And there were people holding guns."

"And he instantly said [to himself], 'This is a concentration camp. This is not Utopia and I have to do everything I can to get out.'"

"He chose to work in the piggery, the one thing nobody wanted to do. But it was outside the main compound, so he didn't have to listen to Jim Jones' speeches, that were [run] round the clock as 24-hour mind control."

"He started planning, each day going into the jungle, figuring a path, and putting food and other things [aside, for the escape]. He convinced Diane St. Louie to do it [escape] and another family to do it."

"They were just waiting for the right moment. It was [Clark's] sense that everything was a lie. He was actually waiting for people to kill Jim Jones. He couldn't understand why at that point, where [Jones] was a drug addict, he was abusing people, horrible things were happening."

"But that sense of community worked against them because they all wanted to do this together and no one did the thing that should have been done, which was to kill him."

"On the morning that the congressman came, Jones gave them Sunday off. Clark said, 'This is our chance.' They said, 'Oh! We're going into the jungle to take a little walk' and they cut through the jungle. [It] was right after that afternoon that the murders took place."

"Here was someone who is uneducated, he didn't finish high school, but he was able to see the situation critically. To say, 'What can I do to save my butt but get as many people as I can out?' He was the real hero of Jonestown."

The question of whether any enterprise dedicated to utopian goals requires a charismatic leader like Jim Jones to succeed remained unasked — along with the attendant reality that if the charismatic leader collapses, his followers are at peril. Given Jonestown, that question might never be asked.

The legacy of Jonestown may be that — as of now — it was the last effort to bring about a society based on racial equality and social brotherhood. ■

Activist Donnetter Lane helps break the tension at the forum.