30 years after, the legacy of Jonestown

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Dark clouds tumbled overhead on that afternoon 30 years ago, in the last hours of the congressman's mission deep in the jungle of Guyana.

With a small entourage, Rep. Leo Ryan had come to investigate the remote agricultural settlement built by a California-based church. But while he was there, more than a dozen people had stepped forward: We want to return to the United States, they said fearfully.

Suddenly a powerful wind tore through the central pavilion, riffling pages of my notebook, and the skies dumped torrents that bowed plantain fronds. People scrambled for cover as I interviewed the founder of Peoples Temple.

"I feel sorry that we are being destroyed from within," intoned the Rev. Jim Jones, stunned that members of his flock wanted to abandon the place he called the Promised Land.

That freakish storm and the mood seemed ominous — and not just to me. "I felt evil itself blow into Jonestown when that storm hit," recalls Tim Carter, one of the few settlers to survive that day.

Within hours, Carter would see his wife and son die of cyanide poisoning, two of the more than 900 people Jones led in a murder and suicide ritual of epic proportions.

And I would be wounded when a team of temple assassins unleashed a fusillade that killed Ryan — the first congressman slain in the line of duty — and four others, including three newsman.

By their wiles or happenstance, scores of temple members escaped the events of Nov. 18, 1978. Among the survivors: Members of the group's basketball team who were playing in Georgetown, 150 miles away. A woman who escaped Jonestown with her young son, hours before the carnage. A family that had left Peoples Temple months before.

Some of the survivors would commit suicide, die at the hands of others or fall victim to drugs. But many more moved on to new careers, spouses and even churches.

With the passage of time, differences between temple outsiders and insiders, temple defectors and loyalists have faded. They share painful memories, guilt-filled feelings, loss of loved ones and psychological scars from an event that has come to epitomize the ultimate power of a charismatic leader over his followers.

Tim Carter was spared to carry out one last mission for the temple. Almost 30 years after that horrible day, we spoke for the first time about one of the worst American tragedies of the last century.

"We are inextricably linked," Carter said. "What you experienced at the airstrip is what I experienced at Jonestown. Somebody was trying to kill us. And my family was killed as well. I cannot describe the agony, terror and horror of what that was."
Peoples Temple sprang from the heartland in the 1950s. Jones built an interracial congregation in Indianapolis through passionate Pentecostal preaching and courageous calls for racial equality. Moving his flock to California, the minister transformed his church into a leftist social movement with programs for the poor.

Political work by his followers elevated Jones to prominence in liberal Democratic circles by the late 1970s. He was head of San Francisco's public housing commission when media scrutiny and legal problems spurred his retreat to Jonestown for what would be his last stand.

Yulanda Williams was about 12 when she began attending temple services in San Francisco with her parents. Her father, lured by Jones' reputation as a Christian prophet with healing powers, believed that the minister helped him recover from a heart attack.

In 1977, as news media were beginning to investigate disciplinary thrashings and other abuse in the temple, Jones summoned Williams and her husband to Guyana.

Upon arrival in Jonestown, the couple felt deceived. It was far from the paradise Jones described. People were packed into metal-roofed cabins, sleeping on bunks without mattresses and using outhouses with newsprint for toilet paper. There were armed guards, and Jones warned that deserters would encounter venomous snakes and hostile natives.

The preacher, who once charmed U.S. politicians and met with future first lady Rosalynn Carter, had turned into a pill-popping dictator who sadistically presided over harsh discipline. "I felt like I was in a concentration camp and he was Hitler," Williams said.

Because her husband was an attorney whose skills could be better used elsewhere, they were permitted to leave after a few weeks. And months before the horrific end, Williams and her family cut ties with the temple.

Eventually, Williams joined the San Francisco Police Department. But she told no one about her temple involvement for a decade because she feared the loss of her job. When she finally confided to a deputy chief, "He said, 'No way,' because everybody had this stereotype" about the kinds of people who were members of Peoples Temple, she recalled.

In fact, these were mostly ordinary people who joined the temple because they wanted to help their fellow man and be part of something larger than themselves.

Williams thrived as a policewoman. The department needed officers to connect with gang members and other juveniles in trouble with the law. "I told my story to young people," said Williams. "They were amazed because they never imagined anyone could beat these types of odds."

On the morning of Nov. 18, Ryan's party was about to tour the settlement, and investigate whether its inhabitants truly were free to go.

Leslie Wilson, wife of security chief Joe Wilson, took her 3-year-old son Jakari to the kitchen building where they met seven others who had endured enough of Jonestown's Spartan life and Jones' faked sieges and suicide rehearsals. The group told fellow settlers they were going on a picnic — but they just kept on moving through the jungle, with Jakari slung in a sheet on Wilson's back.

"I was so scared I was shaking in my tennis shoes," she recalled. "I was waiting for a gunshot and a bullet and me dropping."

Concealed by thick undergrowth, the escapees passed so close to the Jonestown guard shack that they could hear voices. Trudging 35 miles along railroad tracks, they arrived sweaty and dirty that night in the town of Matthews Ridge.
Wilson, who lost her mother, brother, sister and husband that Saturday, would be consumed with survivor's guilt.

On Mother's Day, two years after Jonestown, she thought about what it must have been like for her mother to see two of her children die. She put a pistol to her head.

She did not shoot. She had to live, she decided, for the sake of her son.

After a bout with drug abuse, she twice married and bore two more children.

Now divorced, she goes by her married name Leslie Cathey and works in the health care industry. She finally has found forgiveness, even for Jones, but she cannot forget. "I pray my family did not think I left them," she said. "Not a day goes by that I don't think about it."

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While a temple dump truck ferried the Ryan party and 15 grim-faced defectors toward the Port Kaituma airstrip six miles away, we were unaware that anyone had escaped. But at Jonestown's front gate, Joe Wilson inspected the crowded truck bed, looking for his wife and toddler.

We made it safely to the dirt strip. But then, a tractor with a trailer full of temple gunmen — Wilson among them — soon bore down on us. Gunfire exploded as we boarded two small planes.

Ryan died. So did defector Patricia Parks, NBC newsmen Don Harris and Bob Brown, and photographer Greg Robinson, my colleague at the San Francisco Examiner.

I was shot in the left forearm and wrist. That night those of us who were ambulatory took turns tending to the most severely wounded in a tent by the airstrip: The NBC soundman. A temple defector who someday would become a policeman. A concerned relative whose sister was a Jones mistress. And Ryan aide Jackie Speier, who would go on to a long career as a California lawmaker before being elected to his seat in Congress this year.

Some survivors had fled into the jungle but most took refuge in a cramped rum shop, fearful the assassins would return. "You're gonna see the worst carnage of your life at Jonestown," predicted one of the defectors the next morning. "It's called 'revolutionary suicide.'"

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By the time the airstrip gunmen — among them, Joe Wilson — returned to Jonestown, Jones had gathered his people in the pavilion and, weaving words of desperation, had begun preparing them for the end. Then he used news of Ryan's shooting to convince the throng that they had no hope, no future, no place to go. "The congressman has been murdered!" he announced. "Please get the medication before it's too late. ... Don't be afraid to die."

When potassium cyanide-laced Grape Flavor Aid was brought forward, Jones wanted the children to go first, sealing everyone's fate because the parents and elders would have no reason to live. With armed guards encircling everyone and with youngsters bawling and screaming, medical staff members with syringes squirted poison down the throats of babies.

The killing already was underway when Carter was sent to the pavilion. Frozen in horror, he saw his own 15-month-old son Malcolm poisoned. Then his wife Gloria died in his arms. "I wanted to kill myself," he said. "But I had a voice saying, 'You cannot die. You must live.'"

He did live. Jones had one last mission for the Vietnam veteran.

A top Jones aide gave Carter, his brother and another temple member pistols and luggage containing hundreds of thousands of dollars. They were instructed to take the money to the Soviet embassy in Georgetown along with letters
authorizing transfer of millions from temple bank accounts to that government. It was to be Jones' last gesture for socialism.

But the trio ditched most of the cash during the arduous hike to Port Kaituma, and they were detained by police there.

Two days later, Carter was brought back to Jonestown to help identify the bodies. "People still think everyone lined up in orderly fashion and drank the potion without protest," Carter said. "It's not reality. I saw people who had been injected with poison."

In the aftermath, he went to live with his father in Boise, Idaho. Walking on the street, he felt that others looked at him with loathing and fear. Friends from his youth on the San Francisco Peninsula, where he had introduced some people to the temple, called him a murderer or refused to speak with him.

Though he listed Peoples Temple on his resume, Carter landed a job at a travel agency and worked in the industry for many years. He has had two long-term relationships and is the father of three children. He collects disability payments for post-traumatic stress from Vietnam, but he reflects on the nightmare of Jonestown each day.

"The more time that goes on, the better it is," he said. "I can think about Gloria and Malcolm without feeling that knife in my chest."

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Late on the afternoon of Nov. 18, a coded radio message from Jones was transmitted to the temple's house in Georgetown: Some Jonestown residents had betrayed them, and he wanted the faithful to kill temple enemies. Then members in the Guyanese capital and San Francisco — a couple of hundred people — should commit suicide.

Bay Area businessman Sherwin Harris had sat down for supper at the house with his teenage daughter Liane and his ex-wife Sharon Amos' two other children.

Oblivious to Jones' dire orders, Harris felt hopeful and upbeat. He had traveled to Guyana with the Ryan party to check on his daughter's welfare and, after several days of trying, was finally able to see her in person.

Harris and his daughter discussed plans to spend the next day together, touring Georgetown.

Later, Harris took a cab back to his hotel, his spirits lifted by the visit. But that night police informed him that his daughter, Amos and her two other children were dead.

"It felt like the swing of a sledge hammer full on to my chest," he said. "How could this be? I just left her."

Amos killed her two youngest children with a butcher knife; then she and Liane died the same way. Harris clings to the belief that his daughter was killed, and did not commit suicide.

Since that night, Harris' two surviving children have made him a grandfather four times over. He has become friends with his daughter's closest temple confidante.

"As I've met members over the years, I would hate to bet a cup of coffee on the differences between them and us," he said. "They were normal folks, mostly wanting to make a contribution to society. Other people think it never would happen to them. It could happen to anyone caught up in those circumstances."
One enduring mystery is who put a bullet in Jones' head. Evidence suggests that he shot himself at the pavilion or was killed by a close aide, as he had planned.

Two of those aides, sisters Annie Moore and Carolyn Layton, were among 13 people whose bodies were found in Jones' cottage. But Moore was the only one who was shot and may well have been the last person to die in the settlement.

Her suicide note praised Jonestown and Jones. "His love for humans was insurmountable," she wrote, "and it was many whom he put his love and trust in, and they left him and spit in his face."

Her epitaph read: "We died because you would not let us live."

Rebecca Moore, who lost her two sisters and nephew that day, is chairwoman of the religious studies department at San Diego State University, and when she teaches about new religions and death and dying, she talks about her personal connection to the tragedy.

She and her husband launched a Web site dedicated to conveying the humanity of temple members she feels were dehumanized by photos of their bodies and dismissed as robotic cultists.

Moore thinks her sisters, socially conscious daughters of a minister, were true temple believers to the end. Still, she cannot fathom how they could have joined in planning murders and suicides.

"Jones did not buy the poison and mix it," she said. "Others tested it on pigs. Others, including my sisters, wrote letters about how to kill people. ... What is baffling is why people would participate in something so inhumane."

Thirty years later, dozens of surviving members come together for private reunions because they still value their friendship, the temple's sense of community and their utopian dream of a world free of racism and injustice.

"I go because I feel so strongly about the need for and power of forgiveness and understanding," said Stephan Jones, the minister's son. He was 19, and in Georgetown with other basketball team members on the temple's last day. "I've come to believe a group of people can see the same thing and each come away with a completely different perspective and all be right in the moment," he said. "We had ideas of a greater mission, and now we have found a way to be together that is harmonious and healing and are better able to make a difference in the world."

Today, he is the father of three daughters and is the vice president of a small Bay Area office installation and services company.

In Jonestown's aftermath, Stephan hated his father. But he has come to recognize that the capacity for good and evil, and mental sickness, coexisted in Jones.

"We don't want to face our own responsibility or part in what happened and feel ashamed for being duped or manipulated," he said. "We look for someone else to blame. I realized over time that there was a great need to forgive him, then I could forgive myself."

The unidentifiable or unclaimed bodies of more than 400 of Jonestown's dead, most of them children, are interred in a mass grave at an Oakland Cemetery overlooking San Francisco Bay. Each year a memorial service is conducted on Nov. 18.

Eugene Smith, who lost his wife, their infant son and his mother, went to the grave site years ago but has not returned. Fate had put him in Georgetown the day they perished, but he likes to think he would have resisted the madness in Jonestown, as he believes his wife did.
Now working as a research analyst for California's transportation department, Smith has neither remarried nor fathered more children.

"None of us are survivors; we just got away," he said. "For all of us who were not in Jonestown, part of us died there."

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