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Gentle Wind spiritual group again sues ex-members

The Gentle Wind Project, a nonprofit spiritual group based in Kittery, Maine, has filed a new defamation and invasion of privacy lawsuit against former members who describe it as a dangerous cult.

The former members maintain a website, windofchanges.org, which accuses Gentle Wind of controlling members' lives, practicing group sexual rituals and contributing to the financial ruin of adherents.

Project officials deny those claims and filed a racketeering and defamation lawsuit in federal court in 2004 against the site's operators and others who posted information about Gentle Wind on other sites. A judge dismissed the racketeering charge this month in a ruling that also called state court the proper venue to press the remaining charges. The Project filed that suit in York County Superior Court this week.

Project attorney Daniel Rosenthal said the new suit directly addresses the accusations leveled against Gentle Wind. No dates have been set in the case.

"We plan to pursue this for as long as it takes," said Gentle Wind President Mary Miller. She added that the lawsuit seeks redress for "the lives that they have ruined and the business that they have destroyed."

She said Gentle Wind expects more from its second suit than its first.

"The strongest part of our case hasn't been heard yet," she said.

The Gentle Wind Project was founded in the early 1980s. It offers free "healing instruments," but suggests donations starting at \$250 for them.

Mary and John Miller, who aren't related, co-founded and direct Gentle Wind. The nonprofit claimed net assets of more than \$1.3 million in its fiscal year 2004 tax filings, down from more than \$2 million in filings for each of the previous two years.

The primary defendants, Judy Garvey, of Blue Hill, Maine, and her husband, Jim Bergin, who maintain windofchanges.org, reacted to the new suit with disappointment.

"Just when we thought it was over," Garvey said.

But she added that a chance to speak against the organization could be positive, and stressed that she stands by "every word" of her story.

"It's all the truth," she said. "We were there."

Garvey and Bergin have filed counterclaims that allege comments on Gentle Wind websites have questioned the couple's mental health and moral character. Garvey said her lawyer may revise and resubmit the counterclaims.

But she predicted the action would be unnecessary because other former members will agree to testify in court, a development she said likely would prompt Gentle Wind to end its suit.

She said the case also has become an important test of free speech rights on the Internet.

"We wanted to tell the truth," Garvey said. "We didn't think they'd sue us because they're a nonprofit, but they did. They sued a lot of people."

Other defendants named in Gentle Wind's federal case included Rick Ross of the Rick A. Ross Institute of New Jersey for the Study of Destructive Cults, and Steve Hassan, a cult counselor and author of "Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves."

Two defendants settled before the Gentle Wind case was dismissed, agreeing to omit links to Garvey's website. Ross refused to remove any content from his site before the case was dismissed.

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