

## Heaven's Gate tragedy remains the country's worst mass suicide

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By Yvette Urrea

Rancho Santa Fe -- Ten years ago 39 Heaven's Gate religious cult members killed themselves inside a Rancho Santa Fe mansion, believing their souls would board a spaceship that was supposedly trailing the Hale-Bopp comet. It remains the country's worst mass suicide.

Sheriff's deputies received a telephone tip about the suicides on March 26, 1997.

Deputies Robert Brunk and Laura Gacek responded to the home at 18241 Colina Norte about 3:30 p.m. An anonymous caller had told a dispatcher that 40 people had committed suicide inside the home.

Later that year, two former cult members committed suicide bringing the death toll to 41.

The cult members inside the house reportedly decided to "shed their earthly containers" by ingesting a lethal concoction of pudding or applesauce, sedatives and vodka. Plastic bags were tied over their heads to make sure they reached what they called the Level Above Human. All but two people had purple shrouds draped over their upper bodies.

Initially deputies believed the dead were all men because they all had close-cropped hair, but there were 21 women. They all wore black clothing with new, black Nike running shoes with a white swoosh. Black duffel bags containing their possessions were nearby.

Later, investigators revealed that they had died in groups over several days.

Although deputies at first were skeptical about the call being real, Brunk said in interviews later that when he opened the door, "that decomposing body smell was there." The smell from the bodies was so terrible that the deputies later went to a local hospital to be examined and a county Hazardous Materials Team was sent to the scene.

He recalled that the two deputies walked from room to room and discovered neatly arranged bodies.

A transcript of the dispatch tapes showed Brunk confirming the deaths to dispatchers.

"It doesn't appear that we have any survivors," Brunk reported in a somber tone. "Does anyone have the number for homicide?"

Later, while searching the nine-bedroom, two-story mansion, investigators found one of several computers still on with the image of Hale-Bopp on the screen.

Sheriff's homicide investigators later determined that Richard Ford, a former Heaven's Gate cult member, had received a videotape and letter from the cult members indicating that by the time he got the package, they would be dead. Ford, who lived in Beverly Hills at the time, returned to the Rancho Santa Fe home and was the first to discover the bodies of 21 women and 18 men.

He left the home and called in the first tip from a pay phone in Carlsbad at about 1:30 p.m. but police did not give the call a high priority because it was anonymous. At 3 p.m., dispatchers got a second phone call from a Beverly Hills detective, who said two men had come into the station to report that 40 people were dead inside the home. Brunk was already on his way there.

The group, a religious sect of traveling computer programmers whose business involved creating Internet Web pages, had been in the county since 1993 or '94, living in Rancho Santa Fe since the third week of October 1996, authorities said.

Recently, San Diego County Chief Medical Examiner Cal Vine, 60, recalled walking into the home.

"Walking into that scene, it was just surreal," Vine said. "It was an eerie, eerie feeling."

Before the case was over, Vine said, he understood the cult's special language, the code names members used, and the backgrounds of each person who died.

In the days and weeks that followed, investigators documented the scene, gathered evidence including videotaped farewell tapes, removed the bodies, and notified families. All had identification on them but the task still inundated county investigators as hundreds of calls came in from potential family members.

Sheriff's investigators also held daily briefings for the throngs of media representatives from all over the world. Eventually, they showed a three-minute video of the bodies inside the estate and released all the names of the cult members.

In May of that year, another cult member killed himself at a Leucadia motel. Another cult member killed himself the next year in Arizona.

In July 1997, Rancho Santa Fe residents changed the name of the street to Paseo Victoria and the home's address to 18239 to try to keep curious people away.

In 1999, the county auctioned off cars, televisions and furniture belonging to the cult members, though personal items including the cult's Heaven's Gate Away Team patches were not included. The money went to pay county administration costs and to pay for part of a \$100,000 bill for funeral expenses.

That same year, in mid June, Rancho Santa Fe Groves, Inc. bought the 9,000-square-foot Mediterranean-style home, that included a pool, tennis court, sauna, elevator, putting green and a limousine garage, for a mere \$668,000, less than half the \$1.6 million asking price before the suicides.

It was unclear if the home has been sold again since 1999.