

Landmark Group Attracts Avid Following Amid Cult Accusations

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By Channing Joseph

"Let this wheel represent the set of all possible knowledge," the instructor said, drawing a circle on the board at the front of the room. "Only a small wedge of this wheel contains those things you *know* that you know, and a slightly larger wedge contains those things that you know that you *don't* know," he continued. "But the largest piece of the pie contains everything you *don't even know* that you don't know. And that's where the Landmark Forum comes in," the instructor concluded provocatively.

Lauded as a life-saver by some and reviled as a cult by others, the controversial Landmark Education Corporation (LEC) has won the support of many Oberlin students, faculty and staff with its lifestyle improvement courses. Last Saturday, the group arrived on campus for a three-hour "introduction" to the program held in the Starlight Lounge of North Hall, and which was intended to persuade more Oberlinians to join Landmark's ranks by paying \$395 for the intensive three-day, nine a.m.-to-midnight, introductory course that allegedly shows participants how to "bring about positive and permanent shifts in the quality" of their lives.

Landmark Education, often physically and mentally exhausting (and costing anywhere from \$375 to \$3000, depending on the geographical area), is purported to teach its participants, through hands-on activities, how to see through the psychological "filters," "illusions" and "myths" that keep them from attaining their true potential.

Ominously, however, some observers have contended that LEC, an international, privately owned, for-profit company earning about \$58 million in 2000, has brought about horrible results for a number of its devotees. In fact, during the latter half of the information session at Oberlin, an unknown student posted a note on the window of the entrance to the Starlight Lounge that read, "Is the Landmark Forum a cult?" The message was immediately removed by sophomore Noah McIntyre, a Landmark on-campus liaison, who refused to make any public comment on the issue without first obtaining the approval of the Landmark Corporation's media relations department.

An anonymous citizen, writing under the alias "NoLandmark," has also set up a website called "Inside the Landmark Forum," which claims that the group is indeed a cult, "although not an overtly religious one." Many printouts from the site were put up in protest on the wall outside of the information session.

"Like other cult organizations, Landmark includes charismatic leaders, volunteer labor, money collection, and fostering of dependency through vague promises, humiliation, physical abuse, and a turning away from reality," NoLandmark said at the aforementioned website, alleging first-hand experience with the organization.

The website administrator also claimed that "the sort of 'happiness' that Landmark pedals is potentially very costly... I have watched people go into credit card debt just to maintain the relationship... They will accuse friends and family of all sorts of personality faults and will attempt to recruit them in order to 'fix' them. When the recruitment efforts fail then so do the relationships."

Rick Ross, an expert on cults and the executive director of the New Jersey-based Ross Institute for the Study of Destructive Cults, Controversial Groups and Movements, commented that the group has received several "lawsuits for personal injury. ..., [which] are typically settled before trial," although he said that he could not offer "an exact" estimate on the number of suits filed. But, he added, "I receive constant complaints regarding Landmark."

The Forum, started in 1991, openly admits that its courses are based on the ideas of Werner Erhard, creator of the 1970s "human potential movement" group called EST, which during its existence was known for psychologically abusing participants and forbidding them to leave sessions even for bathroom breaks. The company itself, however, claims that "Erhard has no ownership or management role in Landmark Education," but they admit that since Landmark "purchased Erhard's educational methodology," that "from time to time Landmark uses him to consult with its Research and Design team." Erhard's whereabouts have remained uncertain since an early '90s scandal with the Internal Revenue Service and allegations of sexual abuse from two of his daughters (which were later retracted).

Despite the corporation's origins, though, for Michael Henle, professor of Mathematics and Computer Science, who took the Landmark Forum a few years ago, the result of the Landmark experience

has been solely positive.

“It HAS changed my life considerably,” he said. “I use insights obtained from the course constantly both in my personal and professional life... The Forum particularly enriched relationships with my children and my parents, with all of whom I have a much easier and closer relationship now. I also use Landmark ideas constantly in teaching.”

Although Henle is familiar with suggestions that Landmark may not be as wholesome as it claims to be, he says, “Landmark, in my view, is definitely not a cult. Like any other self-help movement or set of ideas it can be abused. Some people (but no one that I know) may become over-focused on Landmark. Others, [whom] I do know, in their enthusiasm, sometimes give it what appears to others as too hard a sell. However, Landmark Corporation, in my experience, is very clear that what they are about is giving people more freedom to make good choices in their lives, not constrain them in any way.”

The Forum has had a similarly positive effect on George Sakakeeny, associate professor of bassoon, who took the program in 2000 on the advice of his brother. He said, “If you have experienced Landmark Education yourself, you know that it is strangely difficult to talk about... My life hasn’t changed a bit. I am the same person, and I still do the same things. The difference really is that now I love my life and have come to cherish and appreciate every moment of it much more than in the past.”

The program, however, seems to have had its strongest impacts on student participants.

“It has changed the way I hear people when they speak,” senior Anna Roseberry said.

“I am less intent on how I am reacting to what they are saying and am able to pay attention to them better. My mother, for instance, we would not get along for the longest time... Since the Forum, and the advanced course, I have seen that her criticism is only coming from love, not malice...”

The Forum “is a good deal, too,” she continued, “It costs about \$14 per hour when the tuition is broken down. That is cheaper than Oberlin classes, and I have gotten so much more out of it than some classes I have taken here.”

Fourth-year Sage Lewis, another Forum enthusiast, adds that, “even though the courses are cheap,” there are drawbacks. “It has been difficult for me to pay for them and drive to Cleveland [to attend the programs] while I’m in college,” he said with frustration.

“It would make it a lot easier if this program was offered as part of the Oberlin curriculum.”

Lewis and Roseberry invite anyone wishing to learn more about the program to contact them for information on introduction sessions happening next Wednesday and Thursday in the area.