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Monks open door of Welsh retreat

Wales On Sunday, Aug 19 2007

Trawsfynydd, Wales (UK) -- BROTHERS Edo and William bought the picturesque old farmhouse in the middle of the North Wales countryside 18 months ago to establish their own Buddhist retreat.



<< Edward Penney aka Edo Shonin: With his religious background, he declines to say where or what as other than it was "in business" and "abroad".

It was, they say, supposed to be a place of contemplation, where Buddhists and non-Buddhists from across Britain and beyond would come to spend a few days meditating and thinking.

But all that changed three months ago when the pair found themselves at the centre of a storm.

William's mother, Rita Van Gordon, went public with her claims that her son – a successful businessman with a fiancée – had been brainwashed by Edo Shonin, a man she painted as a cult leader.

William, now 28, had gone from being a confident, devoted family man to a "hostile, closed-down, brainwashed zombie," she said.

Edo Shonin, a twice-married Glaswegian who had been born Edward Penny, had a massive influence on William, said his mother.

She complained that her son, from leafy Cheshire with four A-levels, a university degree and a highly-paid job as a regional manager for Pepsi, split up with the woman he was set to marry, quit his job, shaved his head and donned the robes of a Buddhist monk.

And, she claimed: "Whenever I phone William on his mobile, Edo answers and says 'He's busy'.

"If I could talk to William, I believe I could get him back. But we are never allowed to be alone with him – we aren't even allowed to visit."

The comments, which ran in the national press, were the pinnacle of an unholy row which had raged between William's middle-class Cheshire family and the Buddhist retreat.

The numbers attending the retreat dropped dramatically; hate mail began to arrive regularly at the Gwynedd home of the pair. Some people even made the lonely drive up the dirt track off the A470 that leads to the retreat just to pelt the windows with stones.

The Charity Commission launched a probe into its governance.

And questions were asked about the background of Edo Shonin, a man who consistently refuses to talk about his past, other than say he spent time in a French monastery and was ordained in Japan.

Even the police have been involved in the tug of war with accusations being hurled on both sides. Last week, the pair invited Wales on Sunday to Trawsfynydd to break their self-imposed silence and attempt to give their side of the story.

"We believe that we are the victims of a campaign of hate, harassment and religious persecution driven by just a handful of people, some of whom have persecuted us almost incessantly and without rest for a period of years now.

"It saddens me greatly that we are in possession of reams of evidence that supports it is my parents who are the engine behind the negativity and discrimination that we have been subject to.

"I simply think they've not come to terms with the decisions I've made. I told my mother that she must now begin to appreciate that I am 28 years of age and so it is time for her to let go and allow me to live my life, which I am thoroughly enjoying, and that perhaps then she could begin to enjoy her own life too."

William's parents believe he was used for money by Edo Shonin, "led astray" to plough ? 25,000 of his own cash into the retreat while Shonin concentrated on "spiritual" matters.

William claims he had always intended to found a charity with Edo, who he says he met nine years ago, and his career was only ever intended to make enough money for him to eventually do so.

It is his money, though, that paid for the converted farmhouse that is the retreat. But he dislikes suggestions Edo had used him for his cash.

"We've both contributed financially but it's fair to say that, because my skills lay elsewhere I worked on the administration behind the scenes while Brother Edo developed the programme," he said.

Edo says he worked long before devoting himself to Buddhism. But, as with his religious background, he declines to say where or what as other than it was "in business" and "abroad".

He refutes all Mrs Van Gordon's other allegations, although he confesses to tucking into a roast dinner while in Cheshire, but says he never claimed to be a vegetarian.

However, he insists, he has never claimed to be a surgeon, a psychiatrist, to have studied at Cambridge and Yale universities or to have written 32 books, all of which Mrs Van Gordon says he has claimed.

William also says he has made every effort to repair relations with his mother but to no avail.

Last night, Mrs Van Gordon, a primary school teacher in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, was unable to respond to the pair's counter-claims. She had been advised by the police not to talk publicly anymore, she said.

The Charity Commission confirmed it had looked at complaints it received about the retreat, but did not proceed with an investigation once the pair made it clear that, due to the negative publicity, they would be dissolving their charity.

A spokesman said: "A number of concerns were raised with us about the governance and financial management of the charity the Pine Forest Sangha.

"We contacted the charity about these concerns and in the course of our discussions the trustees advised us that they intended to dissolve the charity.

"We have advised the trustees that, if the charity is not wound up, we may wish to make

further enquiries of them in terms of the charity's activities and expenditure."

After winding up their charity, the pair will decide whether to carry on on a private basis or give up entirely.

"There is no brainwashing or sleep deprivation as everyone well knows," insists Edo.

"We simply live thinking beautiful thoughts, saying only loving words and making wonderfully and marvellously beautiful actions like breathing and knowing we are breathing, walking and knowing we are walking."

But both Edo and William know that there are still more questions than answers – and the strange tale of the Buddhists of Trawsfynydd is not over yet.

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