

Centrepoint: the healing

A frank conversation with four siblings about their troubled teenage years at Centrepoint led to the documentary *Angie*, screening nationwide at the New Zealand International Film Festival from late July. Anke Richter, who initiated the project five years ago, catches up with Angie Meiklejohn and her family – and talks to other survivors ready to break their silence about Bert Potter’s toxic community.

It has been a tearful morning. Angie Meiklejohn has just come out of a radio interview with Kim Hill that made some people in the RNZ studio well up. “I was only telling the truth about myself – with no filters!”

The 48-year-old subject of an upcoming New Zealand documentary shakes her dark curls, then digs into her eggs benedict. Her younger siblings have joined her for brunch at an Island Bay cafe near Angie’s Wellington seaside apartment. Bonnie, 43, an early childhood education teacher, drove down from the Kapiti Coast. Karlos, 47, who

was working as a mental health carer until earlier this year, flew in from Auckland. They’re both excited about their sister’s unexpected stardom.

After our plates are cleared, we head to the airport to collect Renee, the baby of the bunch at 41, and a primary school teacher in Tauranga. All of them are parents. All of them have struggled with drugs, alcohol and broken relationships. And all of them are facing their demons now – publicly. This is the second time they’re getting together to talk openly and on the record about Centrepoint, Bert Potter’s therapy community that became the target of police raids and led to convictions for child sexual abuse and drug manufacturing.

Centrepoint operated for 22 years on

ANKE RICHTER IS A *NORTH & SOUTH* CONTRIBUTING WRITER.



Angie Meiklejohn, the focus of the documentary *Angie* that looks at her family trauma.

MIKE WHITE



Above: The Meiklejohn siblings in 1988 at Centrepoint, Albany, where their mother took them to live. Right: Thirty years later in Island Bay, Wellington. From left to right: Bonnie, Karlos, Angie and Renee.



a sprawling, bush-clad property in Albany, north of Auckland. Hundreds of Kiwis passed through the community or grew up there. The Meiklejohn siblings were taken to Centrepoint by their bipolar mother and lived there, mostly as teenagers, from 1986 until 1991.

Five years ago, they met with me for a book I was planning to write. It was the first time they had found the courage to address what happened to them individually – and together on family ecstasy trips.

Our session was cathartic, with tears, hugs and laughter. Their willingness to lay their souls bare to an outsider

and be totally transparent without the safe blanket of anonymity was something I'd not found with other interviewees from Centrepoint. I usually encountered suspicion, fear and shame. After I ran into unsurmountable legal and psychological problems with some of the victims and perpetrators, I stopped researching the book and instead wrote an article for *North & South* in 2015. It was titled *Bert's Labyrinth* and documented the maze I'd found myself in while gathering testimonies and information.

That first interview with Angie's family sowed the seeds of the documentary

Angie by Wellington filmmaker Costa Botes, premiering at the New Zealand International Film Festival on 29 July. It's a confronting but heartfelt exploration of family trauma, cult indoctrination and sexual healing – and also the first documentary that points to the still unresolved aftermath of New Zealand's largest "intentional community".

A lot has happened in those five years. Angie briefly changed her name to "Astaria", hoping to leave her old cult persona behind forever. That phase passed, like many of the projects she started and abandoned while looking for deeper love and belonging. She



MIKE WHITE

moved a couple of times, with intentions to start a community of her own, then write a one-woman play. One path has been consistent: her alignment with a spiritual teaching called “embody truth” that she says “opens the heart”.

During the same five-year stretch, the son of a prominent Centrepoint therapist went off the rails with drug and sex addiction. Until then, he had held himself together, in denial for decades about the abuse he suffered. Now, he wants to go public. Another teenager from the same Centrepoint peer group tried to take an abuser to court. In the end, the prosecution

failed, but he still feels vindicated.

Louise Winn was one of the most severely abused girls at Centrepoint; she used to hide from predators in a caravan on the property. She’d never told her story before talking to me for the *North & South* article; now she’s battling with the NZ Communities Growth Trust over money she needs for oral surgery, the result of years of dental neglect at Centrepoint. The trust was set up after Centrepoint closed in 2000 to help children from the community. “I had to reveal to the trustees in detail what happened to me,” Winn told me. “It totally flipped me for months.” She

will not go to a screening of *Angie*. Too traumatising, she says.

Botes isn’t the only creative mind to be drawn to the story. Auckland writer-producer Anders Falstie-Jensen spent three years researching and writing the play *Centrepoint*. In 2015, it won the Adam New Zealand Play Award and was workshopped at the Court Theatre in Christchurch but hasn’t found a main stage yet. “It’s a risk no one is willing to take,” the playwright says. “Telling the story of Centrepoint just makes too many people uncomfortable.”

Meanwhile, a Christchurch doctor who lived at the community as a seven-



Angie and brother Karlos at Centrepoint in 1986. "We were troublemakers at first," she says. Bert Potter turned Angie around in a teenage workshop. She became a compliant member and later the "commune concubine".

year-old has started the Centrepoint Restoration Project online. It's a truth and reconciliation initiative where former members and children can connect, share their stories and ask for apologies, forgiveness and support. "It's time for a new narrative in the Centrepoint story," the website states. "Instead of shame, dignity. Instead of despair, hope. Instead of fear, courage."

So far, that courage has been shown mostly by the victims. Barbara Kingsbury was described as Potter's right-hand woman. She was sentenced to community service for perjury but later re-established herself as a therapist working out of the former Centrepoint site, Kawai Purapura.

After I met her there in 2014, she moved to New Plymouth, where she is still practising (using another surname). She was also Louise Winn's guardian at Centrepoint, but has made no attempt to seek forgiveness from the younger woman, who never had any help or counselling. She was not interested in talking to me when I called her. "But I'm very happy to meet Angie any time," she said.

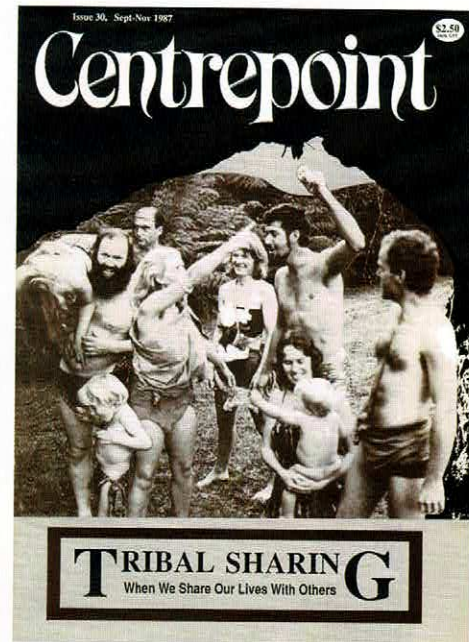
Another powerful therapist from the "thought police" was in tears when I met her in 2014. She wanted to apologise to Angie Meiklejohn, who she had sent off to "sex therapy" with her guru, Bert Potter; the therapy comprised "blowing off" or "raspberry kissing" on the clitoris. But Angie never heard from her.

For Angie and her siblings, there have been five years of ups and downs, including separations. Karlos has gained a bit of weight and his beard has grown. He still exudes the same gentle warmth I remember. Bonnie has become a grandmother. Back then, she seemed fragile and shy – her sister Renee, in contrast, tough and bolshy. "She's always been the angry one," the others tell me on the way to the airport.

I remember the youngest sister well. How she punched into the air at the end of our interview, her copper hair wild, her eyes red and wet: "Meet my fist!" she yelled. That was for all the men at



Above: Louise Winn, photographed at Centrepoint when she was 11. She was one of the most severely abused girls at the community and would hide from her predators in a caravan on the property. Above right: A *Centrepoint* magazine cover from 1987.



herself in 2002. Her harrowing decline, stemming from her own sexual trauma, is captured in Botes' film.

There's relief in the faces of Renee's siblings. For years, she'd told herself, "It was great at Centrepoint. We had an awesome time and a swimming pool and could do whatever we wanted." Only much later did she comprehend why she had started rebelling, drinking and stealing at a young age. "I saw what happened to the good girls, and I didn't want that kind of attention."

Becoming a stropky little fighter was her survival mechanism in a predatory environment. Whenever she passed Bert Potter, she gave him the finger. She says he gave her the shivers – telling her that her breasts were starting to develop, and she'd be as pretty as Angie. Renee had no clue that by then her sister was the "commune concubine", who was sleeping with her surrogate dad.

Renee shakes her head. "Bert was such a tiny, dirty old man – who gave him that power?"

"Everyone did," says her brother Karlos, calmly.

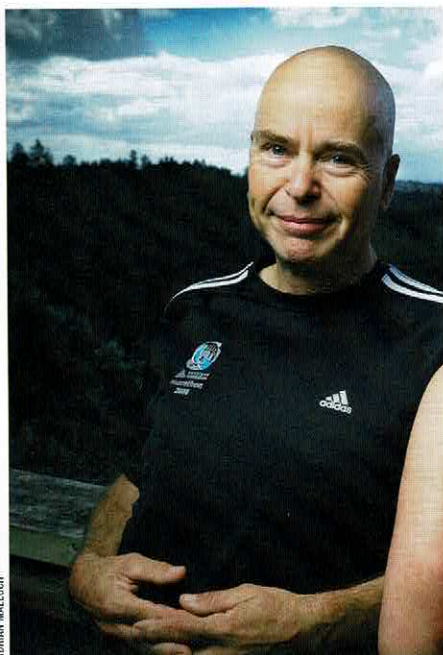
When Renee's periods started, Potter took her up to his house. "He was grooming me to lose my virginity, saying it was time to deflower me." Potter gave her a week to report back to him. She was 12. When her initiation finally happened, with a commune boy, she felt robbed of a first intimate experience. "There was no tender exploration, no romance. It was very much, 'Lie down and get it done

Centrepoint and the creeps she'd met since. Her protective prickliness – and the fact she was constantly moved to new homes, and 14 different schools, by her unstable parents – stopped her from developing close friendships.

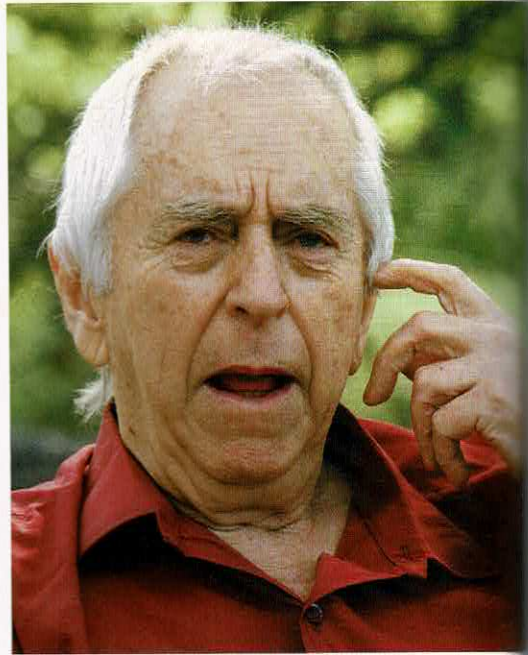
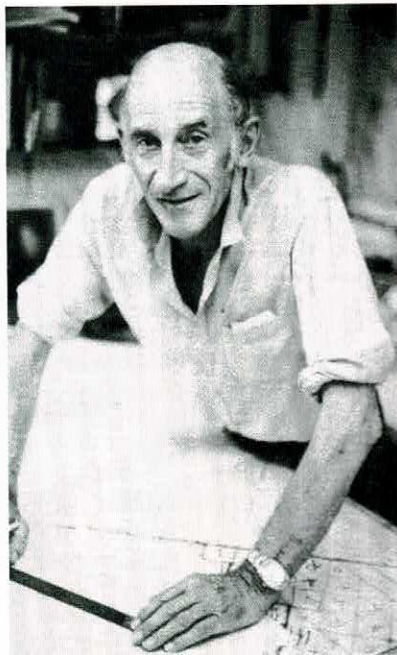
But when Renee arrives at the gate, her hard veneer has vanished. Instead, she's soft and radiant. Something massive has shifted for her, she tells us within minutes. It started with that first "sharing circle" led by Angie. "After that," she says, "I started fixing myself through body-work and energy healing." Her trust in traditional counselling was

blown apart by those claiming to be therapists at Centrepoint, and she never found a counsellor who understood their cult indoctrination. "For the first time in my life, I'm not feeling worthless any more. All the anger has gone."

"That's huge," says Angie, steering her gently towards the carpark. Despite not coping herself until she finally became sober 11 years ago, the eldest sibling adopted the maternal role from the time their mother, Jane Stanton, left them to fend for themselves at the community as she bounced from one boyfriend to another. Stanton killed



ADRIAN MALLOCH



The only public display of regret for what happened at Centrepoint was an apology by founder Bert Potter's son John (above left), when he spoke at his father's funeral in 2012. Keith McKenzie (above centre), the community's doctor, was convicted of indecently assaulting a minor and later struck off the medical register. Before his death, McKenzie wrote to all the Centrepoint girls who had laid charges. "I have recently climbed out of the pit of shame and depression that was my reward for my life at CP," he wrote. "I am sorry for my part in developing a CP in which you were not safe or heard, and the long time it took for me to accept how bad it had been." Above right: Bert Potter in 1999, after serving seven years in jail for indecent assault against five girls. After his release, Potter continued to maintain he had done nothing wrong and said he still believed sex from the start of puberty was appropriate.

with.' Which is what we took out into the world, and it fucked us up."

After her soulless rite of passage, she was allowed to attend teenager meetings with those who were sexually active. Once, she counted 55 of them in the room, ready to drop ecstasy pills together. Renee was in Year 8 when she had her first trip, with her sisters, administered by Potter. "He didn't want my brother there, which says it all."

The girls had to strip off and stand in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror in his house, examining their bodies. "I was feeling so good on the drug but grossed out by what was happening behind us," says Renee. "Bert was beating off in the corner. Completely nuts. As is not being able to get that out of your head for 25 years."

Bonnie Meiklejohn's early sexualisation was similar. She usually kept this part of her past from her partners. Like Renee, she told herself that her home for five years was a place of fun and freedom. But after she had three children of her own and struggled in all her relationships, she realised, "I do have some issues. And a lot of them come

from living at Centrepoint."

There was the lack of privacy. "Hundreds of people, all in your face and out in the open with toileting and everything..." She pulls a face. The open sexuality was also confronting. "It wasn't like people were having sex all over the lawn, but it wasn't hidden. Going off for a quickie at lunch time was quite popular. You could hear it."

Her new best friend there helped her with the transition. The girl also told Bonnie about men "playing" with her when she was a little girl. "I didn't quite understand, didn't know how to cope with the information. So I just shut it away." The friend later pressed charges. That didn't cross Bonnie's mind. "I never blamed anyone because I consented. I'd accepted it and didn't need to make anyone pay for it."

"Bedhopping", as she and Renee call it, became her norm, too - without any awareness or education about boundaries, responsibility and self-care. "It was the opposite of conscious sexuality, really."

Six years after leaving Centrepoint, Bonnie started working in a massage

parlour. "Without a doubt in my mind, I wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been for Centrepoint. Sex didn't mean anything to me, so why not get paid for it? I'd been giving it away, anyway."

Her dissociation from her body and true sexual desire ruined many later relationships, she says. "Through my life, I haven't let anyone close, though I had many partners."

When she first revealed this to me at her house five years ago, she looked distressed, kneading her slender arm, adorned with a tattoo of a feather wrapping around it. She was scared for her own daughter, then 12. "I want to take her away to a deserted island to protect her," she told me.

This time, we sit on the sofa at Angie's new house. The sea is pounding on the rocks across the road. Bonnie looks and talks differently. There's more ease and clarity. Working on the documentary has helped her unpack what really happened in her early teens. In the past month, she's been working through it with a therapist. "The penny has dropped that I've been sexually abused. I was a willing participant but groomed into a sex cult,

believing it was okay for a 12-year-old to sleep with men. The shame – it's not mine, it's theirs. I can let it go."

Renee cuts in. "Coming out of Centrepoint, I was a victim. Now I'm a survivor." Instead of that old anger, there is now fresh power.

Karlos has gone quiet, hands buried in his hoodie jacket. He was always happy to be associated with "CP". When we first met, he told Botes and me that community living and all the therapy there taught him to communicate better and have loving relationships, many with older women. He had no regrets. When we asked him if he had lived in a cult, his answer was: "Yes, definitely. And I loved it."

Since we last spoke, that love has been tainted by the realisation of the impact living at Centrepoint had on his sisters. It's been a painful learning curve. "I feel partly responsible for not smashing those bastards. Feeling impotent hurts." He looks up with a hint of a smile. "But at least we can all talk now and be there for each other."

Most families from Centrepoint don't seem ready to face this process – especially the prominent ones.

"After the court cases, everyone just shut down. Nobody wanted to talk about it at family gatherings. It all went under the carpet," I was told by a child of the community, whose sister was among the first to lay charges against a number of Centrepoint men. Her accusations helped spark the trials and convictions.

My source said that if the adults in the family mentioned anything positive about their time at Centrepoint, the victim felt dishonoured. So it became a taboo. They had their "Friday night clearings", but never about the past: "There is no one I can ask about what affected my family so strongly. How can I get an answer? I don't know where to start." The silencing within the wider family has gone as far as legal threats.

I heard from people who told me about the "web of obfuscation, justifications and downright lies" every time they demanded answers. From an email I received: "I just wanted you to know how bad it still is, the continued ripple effects for many people. The wider story needs to be told."

Earlier this year, I was contacted by

Centrepoint

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What About the Children?



Above: The coverline on this 1981 *Centrepoint* magazine now seems tragically ironic. Louise Winn, one of Bert Potter's victims, is in the second row from the front, on the left. According to a 2010 study by Massey University, every third child at Centrepoint was sexually abused.

a university student who was born at Centrepoint. Her family doesn't want to discuss this part of their history. "I need to know more about it," she explained. "But I still fear exposing myself and my family to the stigma it holds."

Caroline Ansley from the Centrepoint Restoration Project was one of the "invisible kids" who passed through the commune. She was vulnerable because her parents did not live at Centrepoint with her. Ansley was never identified as a victim by police or social workers but was still affected by her experience. She had flashbacks of seeing Potter on the street but couldn't bring it up with her family. It has taken her the past

three years to put her full name to her project, on the back of 33 years of coming to terms with her past. "Shame just makes you afraid, it's the monster under the bed," the mother of two told me earlier this year. "So I had to ask myself what's worse – fear of exposure or the disappointment of not advocating for the right thing?"

Counselling is often not an option for many Centrepoint children. Because therapy was forced down their throats in the community's workshops, they hate the jargon and distrust the profession. An ACC-accredited Auckland psychotherapist in her 50s, who has done academic research about Centrepoint,

knows of these issues – and personifies them. She is related to some loyal children of the “old believers”, but recently started a Facebook group for “former fundamentalists and ex-cult members”. In her work as a therapist, she now helps victims of sexual abuse.

However, she doesn't want to reveal her experience at Centrepoint for professional reasons and has changed her last name. Her father was Keith McKenzie, the community's doctor, who was convicted of indecently assaulting a minor and was later struck off the medical register. Before his death, McKenzie wrote to all of the Centrepoint girls who had laid charges, including Louise Winn, although the “girl in the caravan” wasn't his victim.

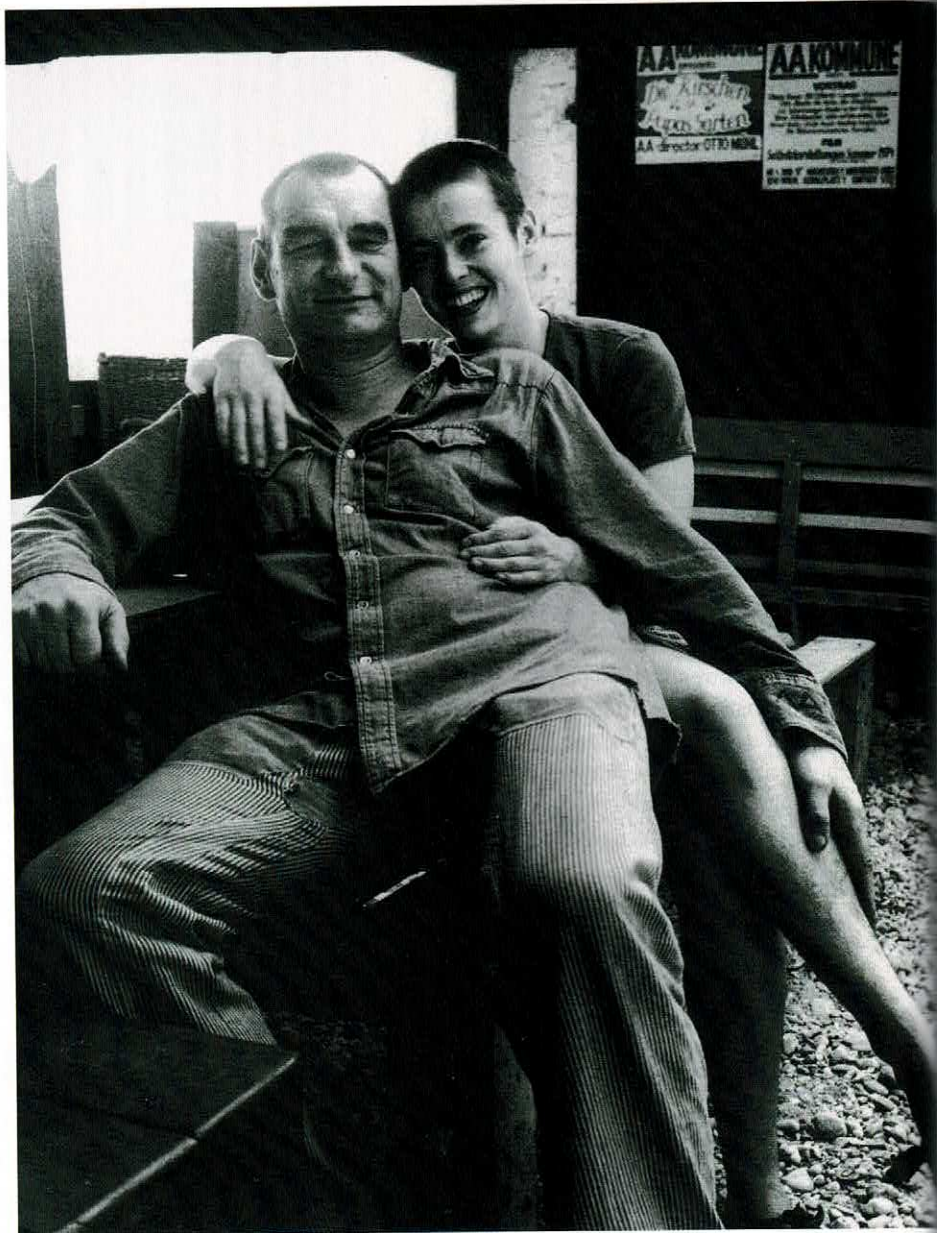
“I have recently climbed out of the pit of shame and depression that was my reward for my life at CP,” he wrote by hand on two pieces of paper. “I know I didn't see what I didn't want to see and avoided the indications that all was not well. I am sorry for my part in developing a CP in which you were not safe or heard, and the long time it took for me to accept how bad it had been.”

In Austria, the Friedrichshof commune operated around the same time as Centrepoint, under more radical principles, led by despotic leader Otto Muehl. It had the same disastrous consequences. But in 2010, the first generation finally offered a public apology, at the site of the former commune, to the second generation. Vocal victim support groups of “Otto's children” formed, and protested against an exhibition of the late artist's work.

In New Zealand, the only public display of regret was an apology by Bert Potter's son, John Potter (a convicted Centrepoint sex offender himself), when he gave a eulogy at his father's funeral in 2012. Other than that, the silence by hundreds of adults who turned a utopian dream into a collective nightmare and left many damaged is still deafening.

Len Oakes, author of the 1968 book *Inside Centrepoint*, did some convincing PR work as Potter's in-house academic, presenting Centrepoint as an idyllic place – even when the first sexual abuse allegations were being raised.

In 2014, after some pushing on my part, the retired Melbourne therapist sent me this email: “I wish to say ‘sorry’



Austrian artist Otto Muehl in 1975, with a member of his radical Friedrichshof commune. The AAO, short for Aktionsanalytische Organisation, believed in a form of “free sexuality” that suppressed any romantic notions or coupledness. The cult dynamics and sexual child abuse at Friedrichshof caused damage similar to Centrepoint. Muehl spent almost the same time in jail as Bert Potter and died a year after him.

to all of those hurt by experiences at Centrepoint. I certainly could have tried harder to protect the vulnerable, but I failed to do so. I offer my unreserved apologies.” He didn't want to comment for this article. Neither did John Potter.

For the Meiklejohns, more is needed than apologies. “We are all at various stages of our healing,” says Renee, “and I want nothing to do with the Bert supporters. They can live with their mistakes. Or not. I don't care.”

In Angie's eyes, too many of the Centrepoint adults are still in denial about the part they played in Potter's fiefdom. “Saying ‘sorry’ over denial is like putting a Band-Aid on a festering wound. Coming to terms with their complicity and making amends is what I hope for them.”

Botes' film about her might pave the way in New Zealand for a long overdue conversation among Potter's estranged former followers and their children, as



The commune's idyllic bush setting on Auckland's North Shore masked a culture of sexual manipulation and drug abuse. Bert Potter was arrested in 1990 after a police drug raid. While still serving his sentence, he was further convicted on 13 charges of indecently assaulting five girls, all minors. The youngest was three.

did the 2012 documentary *My Fathers, my Mother and Me* in Europe for the Friedrichshof victims. "We don't want to pass on any more trauma," says Angie. Her bond with her adult sons – both talk about her on camera – has improved dramatically since her early parenting days, many spent in drunken oblivion. Like Bonnie, she is going to be a grandmother soon. But there is no man in her life at present. "I couldn't be in a relationship right now that's

sex-based. Working on the film has made me look at my inability to have real intimacy because of what happened at Centrepoint. The whole sex work thing... the sacred prostitute."

After doing a number of shamanic and tantric courses over the past decade, Angie became a "love coach" and ran "snuggle parties" for a while. She was offering sensual massage – which often resembled sex-work with a spiritual touch – before recently completing

training in a somatic therapy called sexological bodywork.

In her treatment room, a snow owl with an occult symbol in its beak looks down from a picture above the window. There's a little altar with crystals, feathers and nature objects. One stone has a vagina painted on it, another a tiny penis. No massage sessions will be happening here for a while.

"I have to be clear with myself first: is this coming from a healthy place or from trying to heal myself?" Angie looks at me with her piercing blue eyes. No filters. All truth. "If I have an agenda, I can't be present with my clients."

It's self-awareness like hers that is required of other former Centrepoint members, for the next step towards truth, reconciliation and closure. +