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Self-improvement program draws mixed reviews

By PAUL POST

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Nancy Salzman isn't quite sure how her company got on the October cover of "Forbes Magazine."

Last year, it made \$4 million, a far cry from the Fortune 500 list. But Executive Success, also called Nxivm, has drawn national attention with allegations that its self-improvement and business strategies have the earmarks of a

cult.



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"It is so not a cult," Salzman said.

Some people call the growing self-improvement program one of the most positive, life-changing experiences they've ever encountered. Some say it's like a cult in

which trainees wear sashes and bow to the teacher.

One thing not in dispute is that this program, described by one local businessman as a martial arts course for the mind, draws high-powered participants. Executive Success is the brainchild of motivational guru Keith Raniere, boasting clients around the world at the highest levels of business, entertainment and politics. In the past year alone, 20 billionaires have taken classes. Many local people are getting involved, too, with courses taught twice a

week in Saratoga Springs.

"A lot of people have patterns of behavior they can't break out of. They can't get out of their own

way. That was me," said city resident Deanna Mitzen. "Now I

find myself being much more productive and efficient with

my time, a more patient parent, 'more in the moment' with my children."

Mitzen, a former junior high science teacher, took a basic

level course several years ago. Today, she's an instructor.

"It's really a class on ethics and critical thinking," she said. "It's for anybody who wants to have a deeper feeling of existence. It's not just posting goals

on your refrigerator. It teaches you how to change what you're doing."

Raniere, 43, a Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute graduate,

started the Albany-based venture in 1998 with company

owner and president Nancy Salzman. Locally, classes are

also taught on New Karner Road near Albany International

Airport. There is also a proposal to build a \$15 million, 68,000-square-foot training center in the southern Saratoga County town of Halfmoon.

Clients may also take classes in Manhattan, Boston, Seattle

and several Mexican cities. Executive Success is the subject of a full-length feature article in the October issue of "Forbes Magazine."

"It's getting to the cause of why people are limiting themselves," said Mitzen, who is married to Ed Mitzen, owner of Palio Communications, a blossoming Saratoga Springs advertising firm. "You really learn a lot about yourself."

She said clients have three courses to choose from: Origins, which meets once a week for a month at a cost of \$250 per month; Ethos, which ranges from three months to a year, during which students meet with a personal coach. The cost for a year is \$2,000; and Intensive, which crams all the information from Origins and Ethos into a rigorous 16-day program for \$6,000. Courses are taught by upper-level

instructors, including Salzman.

High-profile clients who have taken the rigorous program include acting Enron chief executive officer Stephen Cooper; Ana Cristina Fox, the daughter of Mexico's president; state Health Department Commissioner Antonio Novello; and Seagram's magnate Edgar Bronfman Sr.

But Bronfman is no fan of the company.

"I think it's a cult," Bronfman told "Forbes."

The magazine said that he and his daughters, who have

taken the course, haven't spoken in months and that Bronfman is concerned about how much money they've invested

in it.

One of the company's chief critics is Rick Ross of New Jersey, who specializes in cults. Salzman dismisses Ross, saying he was hired by a student whose family blamed his messy personal life on Executive Success and that Ross has made a career of targeting Raniere and Salzman's company.

He's not the only one. In 1993, former New York Attorney General Robert Abrams filed a civil suit against Raniere's former business, Consumers' Buyline, alleging

that it was a chain distribution or pyramid scheme. In 1997, a \$40,000 settlement was reached. Six years later,

Raniere still owes \$31,000, said Paul Larrabee, a spokesman

for Attorney General Eliot Spitzer.

"There are a variety of ways we can attempt to recover what

is owed," Larrabee said.

Larrabee declined comment about whether his office is look

ing at Executive Success. "I can tell you," he said, "that we are very aware of Mr. Raniere and his activities."

Last November, Executive Success officials approached

the Halfmoon Planning Board with plans for a futuristic corporate headquarters, called "a tribute to civilization," on eight acres at the corner of Woodin and Stone Quarry roads.

The county Planning Board is concerned about traffic and

zoning, saying the road can't accommodate the traffic and

the zoning is for commercial use, while the training center would be considered a school, a non-permitted use.

"We're still in the concept phase," Town Planner Jeff Williams said. "I've never seen this type of business before. We're looking for more specific information, exactly what the operation is."

Salzman said no more than 5,000 square feet would be used

for educational purposes. Plans call for having a gym and allowing clients with businesses, such as pharmacists and physicians, to move their offices there.

"The steps are the same for anyone who comes in," Halfmoon Supervisor Ken DeCerce said of the approval process. "By law, this community is bound to offer equal opportunity to everyone."

One of the program supporters is businesswoman Barbara Bouchey of Saratoga Springs, who hosts a satellite school for the firm. "It's a program with results that people

have never experienced before," Bouchey said. "People can't explain it."

Bouchey said taking the course has improved her business considerably. She said she's now able to teach an asset management course in less than 10 hours that previously took 60.

"Revenues were up 35 percent the first year, and my employees have never been happier," she said. "That's human potential. That's success."

Another fan, Marc Delnicki, who owns World Gym in Saratoga Springs, completed the Intensive course in August with about 25 to 30 other students.

"In the beginning, I thought a couple of things were a little weird," Delnicki said.

Students are required to wear colored sashes depending on their training level, and it's not uncommon to bow to Ranieri, who goes by the name Vanguard. "Forbes" said students must call him this.

"I talk to him all the time and it's Keith," Delnicki said. "He set it up like a martial arts program. It's for the mind instead of the body."

Delnicki, who has a side business as a personal trainer, said that since taking the course he has more clients and can achieve more athletically.

"You have to be honest with yourself and other people. I

sort of had to push myself to get through it," Delnicki said. "I felt that I was lacking in certain areas in business, especially when it comes to communication and understanding people. I feel like I'm more approachable now.

"For me, at least, it was money well spent," Delnicki

said. "I don't really see \$6,000 as that expensive. I didn't get anything negative out of it at all."

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