

College of Life Foundation changing direction

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The 40-year-old College of Life building is for sale, as is the surrounding 88 acres. / Amy Bennett Williams/The News-Press

Koreshan timeline

For years, the College of Life Foundation has told the Internal Revenue Service it runs a museum featuring a century of Koreshan records and artifacts.

Heir to a rich history, the foundation's roots stretch back to the scholarly, cultured sect that journeyed to Estero's wilderness in the 1890s to build a utopia from the sand up.

Except there is no museum, the foundation's few artifacts are in a building it doesn't own and most of the records were packed up and shipped to Tallahassee in 2009.

A for-sale sign covers the billboard that once proclaimed the existence of the World's College of Life in Estero. The asking price for this prime corner — U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road — is \$30 million.

Yet in a cobwebbed building behind an oft-padlocked gate, the business of this obscure nonprofit continues.

No one suggests the foundation is idling. While preserving its nonprofit status, it continues to make millions from real estate sales, pay its president, Charles Dauray, a salary on par with a U.S. senator and donate hundreds of thousands of dollars to other groups and causes, IRS records show. The

News-Press obtained those public records in a recent look at foundation affairs.

Since 2007, the foundation has given more than \$500,000 to

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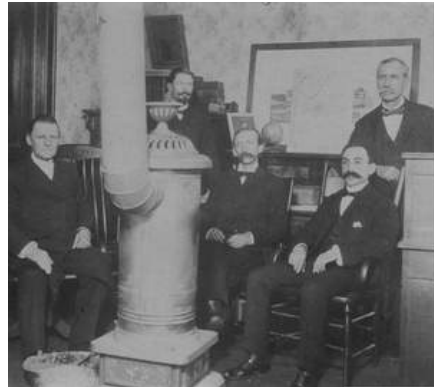
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Florida Gulf Coast University, the Children's Museum of Naples, the Nature Conservancy of Florida, the Volunteer USA foundation and numerous others. It gave the Estero Historical Society two landmark buildings and the money to move them to a new site. It spent \$150,000 to be title sponsor of next month's Art of the Olympians College of Life Foundation Golf Classic at Bonita Springs' Colony Golf & Country Club. It's made investments, recently losing \$400,000 in a biofuel scam now proceeding toward federal court. And it bought and sold millions of dollars of property.

These dealings have raised the eyebrows and tempers of some Koreshan historians and descendants.



This portrait around a stove in Chicago shows from left to right; Cyrus Teed, the founder of the Koreshans, professor Ulysses Morrow, William McCready, Henry Silverfire and James Bubbett / Special to The News-Press

Koreshans turned things inside-out

Though the Koreshans left one of the region's most storied legacies, they and their impact are often misunderstood by longtime residents and largely unknown to newcomers.

Led to Estero in the late 1800s by a charismatic visionary to build the "New Jerusalem," the communal-living group never realized its dream, but did leave behind more than a dozen buildings, hundreds of acres of land, a library and an extensive archive.

The name "Koreshan" came from the Hebrew translation of leader Cyrus Teed's first name. New York-born and Baptist-bred, Teed worked as a doctor in the Civil War. In 1859, he married his second cousin, Fidelia M. Rowe. They had a son, Douglas Arthur (who painted many of the treasures in the Koreshan State Historic Site's Art Hall) and settled in Utica, N.Y., where Teed dabbled in metaphysics and alchemy.

He was working in his lab late one night in 1869, trying to turn lead into gold, when he had a life-changing experience he called his illumination. A divine vision appeared to him, he said — a beautiful woman who revealed to him the secrets of the universe (as well as his new name). She also told him God is both male and female nature, the secret of immortality and other assorted facts about the nature of reality.

Teed began sharing his new knowledge with patients, some of whom started calling him "the crazy doctor." Intimidated, Teed kept sharing his new beliefs, which he saw as the logical next step following Judaism and Christianity: Koreshanity.

In 1888, the Koreshans moved into a home in Chicago where they lived together - as the early Christians did, he pointed out. (Teed did not, as is commonly thought,

"Charles doesn't care," said Fort Myers attorney, Bill Grace, whose grandmother, Ada Case, was a Koreshan. "If he did, he could help preserve the 11 remaining (Koreshan) buildings."

For his part, Dauray said he's proud of what the group has accomplished under his leadership.

"Detractors are a dime a dozen," he said. "We're trying to do a lot of good for a lot of people. Certainly we've been very supportive of a lot of local things that relate to Estero history as well as education and the environment."

Those were Koreshan priorities as well, said Dauray, whose salary fluctuates annually, but averaged more than \$176,000 over the last five years, IRS records show. "They were an amalgam of various interest. Their activities weren't just confined to religion."

Indeed, the foundation's Koreshan forebears did plenty of real estate and development business, amassing a 7,500-acre real estate empire that included much of Estero, Mound Key and Fort Myers Beach with holdings as far away as Tennessee. For a time they thrived in a settlement vastly more sophisticated than any in the region.

Koreshan commercial enterprises included a bakery, a laundry, a printing company, a blacksmith and a sawmill. They made hats, baskets, concrete, mattresses and boats. They had a symphony orchestra and staged plays. And they had electricity before Thomas Edison's winter home in Fort Myers.

All the 250 or so original Koreshans are dead and their descendants scattered. The last four members gave some 300 acres containing 11 buildings to the state in 1961.

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mandate celibacy for all Koreshans; only those in the center of the group. Couples and families could and did join as well.)

By 1893, there were 123 registered Koreshans. Most were highly educated, cultured and accomplished people — and most of them were women. Teed believed in the equity of the sexes and offered women power and leadership.

That year, Teed and three other Koreshans started searching for a site to build the New Jerusalem, his sprawling earthly utopia. They came to Southwest Florida, where German homesteader Gustave Damkohler signed on and donated his 320-acre claim in Estero to them. During the next 11 years, the group moved to Estero and started to build.

Along the banks of the Estero River, they created an oasis of industry and civilization: A self-contained town complete with a sawmill, cement works, publishing house, bakery, industrial laundry, machine shop, general store, an art gallery, a symphony, an acting troupe, a plant nursery and more. Although they were a religious group, the Koreshans never built a church or a temple. For them, the very act of living was worship.

Yet Teed's deviations from mainstream religion upset many of his tradition-minded neighbors, and the fact that in 1904, the Koreshans incorporated the city of Estero didn't help. Many locals feared tax increases and land confiscation. Unable to garner support from established political parties, the Koreshans formed their own, the Progressive Liberal Party, and started printing a political newspaper, The American Eagle.

The next few fractious years were filled with front-page tussles, contested elections and public-meeting shouting matches. In 1906, Teed was attacked on a Fort Myers street by a name-calling, anti-Koreshan group. His health began to decline after that.

In 1907, the Florida Legislature officially dissolved Estero; the area is now in unincorporated Lee County. Teed died Dec. 22, 1908, at age 69, sending the group into a tailspin from which it never recovered. At first, many followers fully expected him to rise from the dead by Christmas, and they waited for his resurrection until the Lee County health department ordered his burial.

The settlement remained, but membership dwindled from a high of about 250 to 55 in 1930 to 10 in 1948. Some members left to form new groups. Some stayed and tried to carry on. But the group got smaller every year until its last member, Hedwig Michel, died in 1982. Before she did, she donated the land containing almost all of the Koreshan buildings — to the state of Florida. It's now the Koreshan State Historic Site. The group's legal identity survives as the College of Life Foundation.

Top salaries and annual income at some area nonprofits

- **Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum, Sanibel**
Income: \$774,443
Jose Leal, curator, \$83,386
- **College of Life Foundation, Estero**
Income: \$6.3 million
Charles Dauray, president, \$139,584
- **Ding Darling Wildlife Society, Sanibel**
Income: \$738,622
Birgit Vertesch, executive director, \$32,039
- **Edison & Ford Winter Estates, Fort Myers**
Income: \$4 million
Chris Pendleton, president, \$139,299
- **Naples Botanical Garden**
Income: \$5.9 million
Brian Holley, executive director, \$173,942

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That's now the Koreshan State Historic site on the west side of U.S. 41. They didn't give it all away, though. The group's corporate entity, then known as the Koreshan Unity, retained some property, artifacts, furniture and the sect's archives. Its last handful of members incorporated as a nonprofit in 1972. Thanks to its government-granted exempt status, it doesn't have to pay taxes on its remaining piece of land: 76 vacant acres on U.S. 41 south of Corkscrew Road.

"(Tax exemption) is a policy designed by the government to encourage groups to provide some benefit to others," says attorney Brian Cross, managing litigation partner with Goede & Adamczyk in Naples. "In this case, the cultural benefit of a museum."

The consequences of failing to do what the foundation tells the IRS it does remain unclear. IRS spokesman Mike Dobzinski said he can't comment on individual groups.

Dauray said he sees the foundation's role to act not as a museum, but as a community catalyst, nurturing environmental, cultural and educational programs such as FGCU's fledgling Museum Studies program. And whether or not he's let the IRS know, Dauray has gone forward with that plan.

Odd attitude for someone at the helm of a historic charity, said Grace, who draws no salary for running another nonprofit, the Koreshan Unity Alliance, which raises money for the state park on the other side of U.S. 41, and has been chronically frustrated by what he sees as Dauray's lack of interest in the Koreshan legacy.

"(The alliance) has been the recipient of only very minor largesse from the College of Life (the group received about \$9,500 over the last five years), but that's peanuts compared to what's going to other institutions that don't even relate to the Koreshan heritage," he said

Streamlining

It's all about streamlining, Dauray said. The foundation leases space it once owned from Village Partners, the Naples Limited Liability Corporation that bought it and the surrounding acreage for \$11.4 million in 2007 and is now trying to sell it. If they do, Dauray said the foundation will simply find an office



Because its board members travel often, the College of Life Foundation is often locked up. / Amy Bennett Williams/The News-Press



The Koreshans put on a variety of productions ranging from musical comedies to Shakespeare. / Special to The News-Press

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elsewhere.

FGCU professor Lyn Millner has visited the College of Life while researching a book on the Koreshans, and noted the discrepancy between the stated mission and what was happening inside.

“Yes, there are artifacts in the building, but as far as a museum open to the public? No. In fact, Dauray told me they’re simply storing the artifacts in the building until the Koreshan State Historic Site has room for them,” Millner wrote in an email. “The building’s roof leaks. A museum wouldn’t have a leaky roof.”

When she asked Dauray what the mission was, he told her it had broadened to “supporting Southwest Florida in ways that reflect interests the Koreshans had,” she wrote.

Did those interests include competitive sports? History professor and Koreshan authority Lynn Rainard thinks not. “Would the Koreshans have advocated funding a golf tournament?” asked Rainard, a Lee County native who teaches at Tidewater Community College in Virginia and has studied the sect more than 40 years “Absolutely not. This is doing nothing to care for or maintain the history or artifacts of Koreshan Unity. It seems a complete departure from their mission.”

But that’s not the kind of big-picture thinking Dauray is now doing, he said. “Look, the Koreshans acknowledged that man is both a physical and spiritual being. I know they didn’t play golf — I’m not stupid — but this is about something greater.” The Art of the Olympians museum is about human nature and achievement. And I think the Koreshans would be very pleased that we have continued to foster their ideals and their thinking.”

— Sources: Koreshan State Historic Site archives; “The Koreshan Story,” by Sara Weber Rea; “Early Estero,” by Quentin Quesnell, The News-Press archives

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