

Millennial & Mormon

How local young adults reconcile their beliefs with modern society

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Telling your dad you had sex and smoked weed is probably the last thing any teenager wants to do.

Ari Hernandez was no exception. But confession was more onerous for the 20-year-old Walkersville resident because of his family's faith: They are Mormon.

Owning up to his lifestyle also meant admitting he broke some of their most sacred beliefs. Like many other religions, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that premarital sex is a sin, "the most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost," according to the Book of Mormon, Alma 39:5.

The church's Words of Wisdom, the health laws revealed to prophet and founder Joseph Smith, also label alcohol, tobacco, coffee and tea as harmful. Though not named in the original doctrine and covenants, the church eventually added marijuana to the off-limits list.

Hernandez, who grew up attending one of the local wards, or congregations, in the larger Frederick LDS stake, said he knew what he was doing was wrong. But peer pressure and the spiritual questioning common among teenagers made him ignore those nagging pangs of guilt.

"I knew better, but I just didn't care," Hernandez said. "I didn't feel the spirit. I felt empty."

Ironically, it was that same feeling of emptiness that led Hernandez back to the church, owning up to his actions to his father during a car ride.

"The first thing he said was, 'Did you wear protection?'" Hernandez recalled. "He didn't banish me, he didn't yell at me."

Hernandez also wasn't ostracized from the church. Instead, he described the welcoming nature with which he was forgiven and accepted back — by fellow Mormons and more importantly, by God. He has abstained from taking the sacrament, the bread and water representing Jesus' body and blood that members take each week to renew their covenants with God. The abstinence was part of his requisite reparations process with the church, but also something he has chosen to continue beyond the required time.

COMING OF AGE IN THE CHURCH

Hernandez is not alone in his struggle to reconcile his faith with modern society and culture. Particularly for teenage and 20-something believers, being Mormon can make the already-challenging nature of that stage in life more difficult, said Bishop Kevin Beck, who heads the Walkersville ward of the Frederick stake.

Beck's coming of age in the LDS church was decades earlier, a period when the abandonment of organized religion was not as prevalent as is believed to be the case for young adults today. He was raised in Utah, the state with the largest Mormon population.

Yet in many ways, Beck saw his experience reconciling religion with young adulthood — including a

THE FUTURE OF FAITH

Editor's note

This is the first in a monthly series about Frederick millennials who actively participate in organized religion. The series will explore the challenges and benefits experienced by local young adult followers of various faiths at a time when their generation is characterized by declining interest and attendance in religious services nationwide.

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Are you a millennial with a story to share about your faith? Contact Nancy Lavin at 240-215-8675 or nlavin@newspost.com.

two-year break from regular church meetings that coincided with his time as a student in a Utah community college — as similar to that of Mormon young adults to today. Like Hernandez, he also felt the pressure of non-Mormon peers and a curiosity to try the "forbidden" fruits: coffee and beer.

"I don't think peer pressure is any stronger today," Beck said. "The real difference is how quickly messages are shared. Social media makes it really easy to get involved in some of these temptations."

Beck acknowledged, and even encouraged, members to question their faith at any and every stage of life. Breaking away from the church and its teachings depends on the individual, he said.

"I think some people need to see it, but others need to live it," Hernandez agreed.

If Hernandez fell into the latter category, Moroni Okonah was decidedly the former. Clad in a suit and tie, Okonah exuded a confidence beyond his 18 years as he stepped up to the lectern during a recent sacrament meeting at the Frederick chapel.

His faith was evident in the words he spoke to the congregation, referencing passages from the prophet Moroni, for whom he is named, in the Book of Mormon. Equally strong was his conviction that his pending departure, bound for a two-year mission trip to California to share his faith with others, was God's calling for him.

His voice caught, choking with emotion, as he described the intensity with which he felt God's presence while preparing for his trip.

"It will be tough, it will be rough ... but I know at the end of the day, I'm spreading God's love to others," he said.

In a later interview, at a going-away party at his Walkersville home, Okonah admitted he was nervous about his final testimony to the congregation, a sort of farewell before his mission. Asked whether he ever doubted his faith, particularly after leaving home for college — he completed two semesters at the LDS-owned Brigham Young University in Utah before taking a break to complete his

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Moroni Okonah, 18, a Walkersville High School graduate who has completed his first two semesters at Brigham Young University in Utah, recently left for a two-year mission trip to California with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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ON YOUR MARK

His toe is on the mark...he's ready to go. An athlete can see himself winning the race; to have a chance at glory, he visualizes victory, he sees himself crossing the finish line in first place. Will he be the winner? Whether or not he wins this race, he is already a winner, for he is learning how to confidently face life's challenges. To be confident and successful in life we must practice living according to the Word of God. We must believe that when we have faith in God, we will prevail over our challenges and emerge intact. Worship this week. When your heart and mind are focused on God, you will emerge victorious.

Daily Devotional Reading

Esther 2:1-23	Esther 3:1-15	Esther 4:1-17	Esther 5:1-14	Esther 6:1-13	Esther 6:14-7:10	Esther 9:1-19
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Scriptures Selected by the American Bible Society

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Mormon

(Continued from D3)

mission — he said he hadn't, really.

There are always questions, he said. That's natural. But he never seriously strayed from his convictions — even when he was in the presence of peers who did not share his beliefs.

UNDER PRESSURE

A former basketball player who also dabbled in track, lacrosse and soccer during his time as Walkersville High School, Okonah described himself as "not popular, but pretty well-known in high school." He went to parties, refusing when a friend offered him alcohol or drugs.

"For me, it was like any normal high school experience," he said. "My friends knew, but they didn't really treat me differently."

There was the occasional teasing about how many wives his dad had — polygamy is a chief misconception about the church — but Okonah said he was never treated badly for his beliefs.

Watching him interact with fellow players on the team, Dan Pfeil, his coach and next-door neighbor, said he never would have known Okonah was Mormon.

"The only way I found out was because he couldn't participate in sports on Sunday," Pfeil said. "I think [his teammates] thought of him as a friend, just like anyone else."

Okonah's brother, Nephi, a junior at Walkersville High and also a basketball player, described his peers' reactions to his faith as "interesting."

"I think people stigmatize LDS people as weird,"



Staff photo by Bill Green

Having pizza and playing Scrabble, from left, are Ariel Perez, Jade Spencer, Ricardo Hernandez and Aaron Johnson, all members of the Frederick stake of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Young Single Adult group.

he said. "A lot of people were surprised to know I was LDS."

Rather than declining offers of drugs and alcohol, Nephi chose to steer clear of them altogether, surrounding himself with friends who "know my stance, my values."

Ricardo Hernandez, Ari's older brother, laughed as he listed some of the common questions he's been asked by non-Mormons: How many wives does your dad have? Do you guys worship Joseph Smith? Do you wear special underwear?

His answers were decided "no's" on the questions of polygamy and Joseph Smith, the American religious leader who founded the LDS church in 1830.

But when it came to

questions about underwear ... well, he was wearing them at the time of the interview, he said. Mormons who have received the endowment ordinance at the temple wear special temple garments under their clothes as a reminder of the covenants they made in the temple.

Ricardo's tone grew more serious as he recalled how someone ripped up a Book of Mormon in his face during his two-year mission in Arizona. His decision to join the Army after returning home also proved challenging, particularly during basic training.

"It was like night and day," he said, comparing himself with others in training. "Everybody was swearing, talking about girls and drugs, and I'm just sitting

here like, 'OK.'"

Unlike Ari, Ricardo never forayed into the world of drugs, alcohol and sex. Finding a romantic partner who shares his beliefs has been difficult, though, he said. He dated non-Mormon girls in the past, but at this stage in his life, he was less open to a future relationship with someone outside the church.

"There are fantastic people outside the church," Ricardo said. "But we want something called eternal marriage. And to find that, I think, is more likely with someone from the church."

Jade Spencer, 26, offered a different perspective. Her ex-husband was not Mormon, but their different faiths had little to do with their divorce, she said.

Marriages that do not go through the requisite temple ceremony are not recognized by the church. But there are some "part-member" families, meaning one spouse is Mormon and the other is not, according to Allison Rizzo, a member of the Walkersville ward. Rizzo used to be among them — her husband was not Mormon when they married, though he was later baptized in the church.

Spencer, a self-described "Army brat" who moved frequently as a child and teenager, was often one of very few Mormons in the places where her family lived. She was used to being surrounded by non-Mormon peers, a trend that continued after she married her ex-husband, who belonged to the Church of God in Christ, a pentecostal, largely African-American denomination.

Like Ari, when confronted with temptations such as alcohol and drugs as a teenager, Spencer accepted. She still went to church with her family, but didn't take the teachings seriously, she said. She didn't see her now-ex-husband's faith as a problem at the time they married.

Even after recommitting to the LDS church, a decision she made about two years ago, she maintained that there were benefits to having peers of other faiths and spiritual beliefs.

"It makes you more well-rounded," Spencer said. "You get to be able to ask questions. It makes you understand your own faith better, having to describe your beliefs and why you believe them to other people."

THE BENEFITS OF BELIEVING

Unlike some of his peers, Ariel Perez, 19, did not grow up in the LDS church. His upbringing included some introduction to Catholicism through occasional Sunday Mass, but religion was not a central part of his childhood.

He was introduced to the LDS church through a friend, who invited him to meet some of the Mormon missionaries visiting his house. It wasn't instant, but the first moments resonated with Perez.

"They taught me how to pray," he said. "It was a really emotional experience for me."

His subsequent exploration, attending meetings

and learning more about the faith, only confirmed that he had found the right place, or as he put it, "it found me."

"You don't have to look for happiness," he said of how becoming Mormon has changed his life. "You have this sense of purpose."

The decision wasn't made lightly, and it took his family, particularly his mother, some time to come to terms with his new faith.

"My mom really didn't approve in the beginning," Perez said. "It was hard for her to understand. But little by little, she came to understand. The values, the beliefs ... it's really about being a good person, helping others."

Because he wasn't Mormon in his high school years, Perez didn't face the same challenge of having to refuse offers of drugs and alcohol. He tried both, though he never regularly consumed either, he said.

That doesn't mean the temptation doesn't strike in his post-high school interactions with peers, though. But Perez likened choosing faith over temptation to lift weights at the gym. While the weight itself doesn't change, it feels progressively lighter each time you lift it, he said.

In some ways, the church can also make the challenges of young adulthood easier, offering a guide for those uncertain about their futures, said Beck.

"There are so many life decisions that our young single adults have to make," he said. "Having a concrete set of values to navigate through those waters, I think, just makes a huge difference."

"It's not only the doctrine, but the practice," he continued, naming the regular service opportunities, both in the local community and through formal mission trips, as examples.

Ari has seen his life improve since returning to the church. He has a job, and is in school, studying for a general studies degree from Frederick Community College with the goal of eventually becoming a nurse. And the emptiness he once felt has been replaced with purpose.

"It doesn't matter what religion, what race, what background you have, what mistakes you made," he said. "God accepts everyone. He forgives everyone."

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