

Ex-MOVE members say they were raised in a ‘cult’ where abuse and homophobia ran rampant

More than a half-dozen ex-members of the Black liberation group MOVE have come forward alleging mental and physical abuse within the organization.

Jason Nark

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Rain Robbins is one of the alleged victims of the MOVE movement. JOSE F. MORENO / Staff Photographer

The September anniversary of the execution-style shooting of former MOVE supporter John Gilbride often passes in silence, but a podcast digging into the nearly 19-year-old mystery has unearthed new allegations that are roiling the West Philadelphia Black liberation group.

More than a half-dozen ex-MOVE members have gone on the record in both the *Murder at Ryan's Run* podcast and a blog titled *Leaving MOVE 2021*, alleging physical and mental abuse in MOVE, a doctrine of homophobia and colorism, and what they describe as a manipulation of the public and the media under the banner of social justice.

The 2002 homicide of Gilbride, many ex-members said, was often used as a karmic warning to MOVE children for perceived misbehavior. These ex-members bristle at MOVE being described as activists or liberators, or even pro-Black.

"I would not call them anything other than a cult," said Maria Hardy, 24, who spent nearly a decade living in MOVE's Kingsessing Avenue headquarters.

Maria Hardy, who is queer, said scripture decreed by founder John Africa forbid homosexuality in any form, leaving her terrified. JOSE F. MORENO / Staff Photographer



For nearly a half-century, MOVE, the anarchist West Philadelphia group known for its deadly clashes with the city, has presented itself as a “family.” Now, as the blog posts and podcast episodes continue, that united front is cracking.

The world came to know MOVE after Philadelphia police, with the city’s approval, dropped a bomb on MOVE’s fortified Osage Avenue headquarters during a standoff on May 13, 1985, killing 11 Black people. Five were children. The bombing remains Philadelphia’s greatest shame.

This year, just before the 36th anniversary, MOVE members learned that the remains of one of the bombing’s youngest victims — believed to be 14-year-old Tree Africa — were mishandled by the city and held and used by the University of Pennsylvania and Princeton University. Earlier this week, Penn released a lengthy report on the controversy, citing two scholars for “gross insensitivity.”

Now, accusers — whose allegations were first reported in a Billy Penn article earlier this month — say MOVE leadership is in turmoil as a result of their coming forward with abuse allegations. All of the accusers The Inquirer interviewed said two women have been in charge of MOVE for several years. The first is Alberta “Bert” Africa, the former wife of MOVE founder John Africa, and ex-wife of Gilbride. The second is Sue “Ria” Africa, whose son Tomaso was killed in the 1985 bombing. Neither could be reached for comment.

Other public faces of MOVE, including Pam Africa and Mike Africa Jr., did not return requests for interviews, but both have made posts on social media that support the accusers and acknowledge issues within the group. Africa Jr., who was born into MOVE, pointed blame at Alberta and Sue in a Facebook post, claiming that the two “hijacked the mission” and that both women “orchestrated and caused so much harm, confusion and chaos for everybody in MOVE and many people outside of MOVE.”

Pam Africa’s daughter, June Stokes, said she didn’t want to rehash her trauma with *The Inquirer*, but spoke at length with podcast producer Beth McNamara and released several statements to the *Leaving MOVE 2021* blog, which is run by a former MOVE supporter who left in 2018.

Stokes, who was raised as Pixie Africa, wrote in the blog that she was pressured into marriage by MOVE hierarchy and had her first child when she was 13, inside the organization’s headquarters. She was planning her “escape” from MOVE around the same time the city was unveiling a portrait of her mother at the Municipal Services Building.

“Exposing the wrong doesn’t mean that you lose who you are, it means that you are finally taking control of who you are!” Stokes wrote. “I am not trying to hurt anyone or get anyone hurt and I understand that this is painful and hard. But so is living a lie! So is being abused! So is not knowing who you are! With more and more of us coming out and telling our truth at this point it’s hard to deny that there’s something very wrong here.”

Stokes has gone into hiding, fearing retaliation from MOVE members and supporters for speaking out, and a GoFundMe account aimed at helping her relocate and provide for her five children has raised nearly \$9,000.

In July, Pam Africa released a statement supporting her daughter and the other accusers, while being wary of the people behind the blog and podcast. Africa, in her statement, said she tried to address MOVE’s internal issues over the years “to no avail” and lamented that those problems were now “in the hands of people outside of the movement and outside of our community who seem to be preparing to profit and elevate themselves off of our pain.”

Other women who spoke to *The Inquirer* echoed Stokes’ story, saying they were pressured to marry and have children upon menstruation.

“This [pressure] is really dangerous and if anything, detrimental to the Black community and the work being done,” said ex-member Rain Robbins, 21. “It’s causing people to have serious mental health problems. I struggle with suicidal thoughts, attempts, depression, and anxiety.”

Hardy, who is queer, and Robbins, who is bisexual, said scripture decreed by founder John Africa forbid homosexuality in any form, leaving them both terrified.

Robbins’ uncle, ex-member Josh Robbins, said MOVE leaders took extra steps to gauge his sexuality when he was just 12.

“They took me to visit sex workers,” Robbins, 29, said. “They would want to know what I did, like what positions, afterward.”

The fallout has prompted at least one group, the West Philly-based Food not Bombs Solidarity to recently withdraw its endorsement of MOVE until “those responsible for the abuses within MOVE begin the process of restorative justice by coming forward to admit their wrongs and knowledge of what was happening, apologizing, and taking transparent and decisive action to assure the abuses are stopped.”

The murder of Gilbride is a lesser-known incident that played out about 17 years after the MOVE bombing. Gilbride, like today’s accusers, had left MOVE but was fighting with Alberta Africa for visitation rights to their son, Zack. MOVE had vowed to not turn the boy over and boarded up headquarters during the court battle. Gilbride had expressed fear for his life.

On Sept. 27, 2002, just before midnight, a gunman approached Gilbride’s 1985 Ford Crown Victoria LTD outside his apartment in the Ryan’s Run complex in Maple Shade, Burlington County, and fired six shots through the driver’s-side window, striking him in the head and chest. Gilbride, a baggage supervisor at US Airways, had been scheduled to have his first unsupervised visit with his son the next morning.

The case remains unsolved. In the past, MOVE members suggested Gilbride was still alive or killed by the government. Philadelphia police once speculated that he was murdered over gambling debts. The Burlington County Prosecutor’s Office has said little about Gilbride’s homicide since 2002, but, this week, County Prosecutor Scott Coffina released a statement to *The Inquirer*, saying his office remains committed to the case despite nearly two decades of frustration and challenges:

“As the veil of secrecy begins to lift from the MOVE organization, we hope anyone who might be able to provide information that could assist in solving this case will come forward and tell us whatever they know, no matter how inconsequential they think it may be.”

McNamara, a Los Angeles resident, said she interviewed 40-plus individuals (including this reporter) for the podcast, amassing 100 hours of recordings and collecting thousands of pages of documents. No one has been paid, she said, and she’s not making any profits. She finished Episode 7 this week and said she’s still actively investigating.

“All I ask is that people have enough consideration to hear everything out,” McNamara said. “You can have sympathy and believe people before 1985 and after 1985. The people I’m interviewing are alleging their perpetrators came from within MOVE, not the city or the government.”

McNamara prefaced one episode of the podcast by acknowledging that both she and her coproducer are white and that Gilbride, who met Alberta Africa while at Temple University, was also white. Most of the alleged victims she spoke to are Black. Ex-members interviewed by *The Inquirer* said that skin color plays a confounding role within MOVE, with lighter-skinned children given special privileges that darker-skinned children were denied.

The man hosting the blog, Kevin Price, is also white. He became enamored of MOVE as a teen in Virginia and later moved to Philadelphia to become a devout supporter. He said he was actively involved in a smear campaign against Gilbride and

his family during the custody battle, per MOVE's orders. Price said Gilbride's murder gnawed at him for years and plotted a way out. He met his wife in MOVE and it took years before both were in accord about leaving.

The goal for the blog, Price said, is to center the alleged victims' stories and show their parallels with Gilbride, who simply wanted to move on with his life, like them.

"I'm wanting justice for the kids raised in MOVE who were tortured," Price told The Inquirer. "And I'm wanting justice for the Gilbride family."

Jason Gilbride, John's nephew, said he's never spoken to his cousin Zack, though he's tried. He said the family hopes the podcast and blog can shake something loose, whether it's a conviction, a more critical look at MOVE, or more members and supporters deciding to leave. (Zack Gilbride could not be reached for comment.)

"Anybody else who is stuck in MOVE who is still trying to get out, we hope they can find the resources and tools to get out like the others have," Jason Gilbride said.

Hardy told The Inquirer that the GoFundMe account is a way for her to start over. A college student studying journalism and African American studies, she's raised about \$3,000 so far. She began questioning in MOVE at "13 or 14" and elders began suggesting she marry and have children.

"They kicked me out when I was 19 when they found out I was registered to vote," she said.

Josh Robbins, also born into MOVE, said he left several years ago before his first daughter was born.

"I was not about to raise my child in that," he said. "I believe the leaders should be held accountable for everything that they did."

Salina Robbins, known as Lina Africa in MOVE, decided to speak up after supporters started attacking those coming forward with abuse allegations and the people behind the podcast and blog.

"These people are not lying," said Robbins, a niece of Josh and cousin of Rain.

Salina Robbins, 27, said MOVE leaders wanted her to marry John Gilbride's son and, later, at age 14, was asked to marry a 19-year-old man in Morocco.

"I was raised in a cult that denied me basic human rights," she said.

Josh Robbins said he has spoken to law enforcement about his concerns, while Rain has consulted with an attorney. Others declined to say whether they'd taken their concerns to law enforcement and some said they have not.

Rain Robbins, and other ex-MOVE members, have also spoken to the Gilbride family. Rain said her family was involved with smearing Gilbride and his loved ones during the custody battle, when all he wanted to do was leave MOVE and still see his son.

"I want them to have peace," she said. "They deserve that."

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