

When Polygamy Becomes a Tourist Attraction

The Utah mansion where convicted pedophile and polygamous religious sect leader Warren Jeffs once lived is being purchased by one of his former wives, who hopes to make it a tourist attraction and home for people who have left the church.

The house and adjacent buildings are part of a walled compound that straddles two blocks in the town of Hildale, a twin border community with Colorado City, Arizona, where many members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints lived.

Jeffs, 61, was the spiritual head of the breakaway sect, which the mainstream Mormon Church has condemned for promoting marriage between young girls and older men. He is serving a life sentence in a Texas prison for sexually assaulting two underage girls he had married.

Photos of the sprawling mansion, whose estimated value is \$1.2 million, reveal its 41 bedrooms, meeting and prayer rooms, dining rooms and two commercial-size kitchens.

Brielle Decker, who said she was forced to be the 65th of Jeffs' 79 wives when she was 18 years old, is hoping to buy the mansion for a reduced price.

"Everything would flourish more if this thing was turned into something good," said Decker, who escaped from the FLDS five years ago. "That's my main goal."

Decker, 31, has occupancy of the property while she raises funds to purchase it. The mansion is big enough for public events and to house ex-FLDS members transitioning to the outside world, she said.

With its secretive history and proximity to Grand Canyon and Zion national parks, the house should attract inquisitive tourists, Decker said.

“We could do tours upstairs,” she said, “and the middle floor, where the kitchens and the conference rooms are, could be used for events, a restaurant and a gift shop.”

Decker spent several months at the mansion while Jeffs, who was once on the FBI’s most wanted list, eluded police. Their marriage was not considered legal, and she is planning to wed her fiancé next month.

Properties belonging to the sect were held in a trust that was established in the 1940s so that members could benefit from its shared assets in line with their religious beliefs. The state of Utah seized the trust in 2005 and is selling back its assets to FLDS members and ex-members.

The compound is one of several FLDS sites sprinkled throughout Texas, Utah, Colorado, Arizona and South Dakota. {eo}

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