

FIRST FOR REAL LIFE

# EATING IS A

That is what Laura R was taught when she joined a local slimming club. But she was actually being drawn into a bizarre cult called Remnant, which uses interpretations of the Bible to persuade women not to eat

By **Karen Grattage**

**L**aura R. has an attractive, slim figure, but like most women she sometimes feels she could lose a few pounds. However, when she joined a local slimming club she never imagined she'd be caught up in one of the world's most bizarre cults.

Laura, 35, an actress who hoped to slim down for a new role, actually put on 20lbs and developed bulimia because of the stress she suffered at the Weigh Down classes which she joined in Nashville in the US.

The classes, run by Gwen Shamblin, a self-proclaimed diet expert and religious leader, persuade women to follow a strange diet then surreptitiously lure them into joining the cult. Laura initially lost 5lbs on the diet but was soon being sucked into a church called Remnant.

The cult, which believes eating past fullness is a sin, preaches that anyone who does not obey its laws will not be one of God's 'chosen few'. Members are warned not to eat until their stomach growls – but then to snack on whatever they fancy, including the most unhealthy foods.

Laura, now a healthy 8½st, says: "It is a terrible diet that just doesn't work. But the cult it pulls you into is even more dangerous. You are strongly encouraged not to associate with anyone outside Remnant, and I lost many friends and even a boyfriend as a result."

## 'People starved themselves'

Followers meet twice a week in people's homes to watch a live webcast hosted by leader Gwen Shamblin, who uses her own interpretations of the Bible to persuade people not to eat.

Gwen Shamblin's *Weigh Down Diet* book was first published in 1997 and has sold more than 1.2 million copies.

Gwen, who runs the church from Nashville, claims it is operating in 120 locations around the world. Former members warn it could soon have branches in the UK.

Laura, who managed to leave the cult after nearly a year, explains: "Gwen's classes are on

DVDs which you buy and watch at home. Then gradually, references to Remnant are added and the teachings get more extreme.

"It's very basic to begin with. They say only eat when your stomach growls, and eat half your normal meal size. You're supposed to pray to give you strength to carry on with the diet."

Laura, who lives in Sun Valley, California, was 9st and set herself the target of losing 10lbs for her new singing role in a cabaret show when she joined Weigh Down four years ago.

"I'd tried everything – Atkins, calorie counting, blood type diets. Weigh Down was just the next one for me to try," she says.

"On the surface, the diet seemed to make sense – don't eat too much and try to cut down on meals until you are really hungry. But some people were starving themselves for days and others were left feeling extremely guilty if they couldn't last that long.

"Once you can eat, you're told to have what you like – so I was eating tortilla chips and chocolate cake, stuff that was unhealthy and full of calories.

"I lost hardly any weight and still felt like I was starving myself. I couldn't understand why it wasn't working, but I thought I must be doing something wrong and carried on."

After the 12-week course, which cost £50, Laura tried the intermediate then advanced courses to see if they made a difference, paying a further £50 for each.

"Gwen's principle is that if you overeat



Remnant leader Gwen Shamblin preaches that overeating is a sin



Budding actress Laura was 9st before she joined Weigh Down

it is sinning. She picks out passages in the Bible to back up her messages. But when I read the full passages, I realised she'd taken them out of context," says Laura.

"But every time you see her on the DVD and how skinny she is, you are determined to do as well as she has done on the diet. Gwen looks like she can only weigh about 6st."

As Laura became increasingly isolated from friends and family, her boyfriend questioned her involvement, but she wouldn't listen to him and they split.

"As far as I'm concerned, Remnant is very unforgiving and tells you that anything you do wrong in your life, you are going to be punished for," says Laura. Remnant members will be saved because they do not overeat, and obey all the commandments, according to Gwen.

"You're not supposed to date anyone outside Remnant and you have to persuade family members to join.

"I had suffered from bulimia in the past

# SIN!



"I have learned from experience time and time again ...

If you don't have peace with something, it's not God's Will."

## “The Remnant diet made me binge eat – I ended up putting on 20lbs

but had stopped for years because my therapist had helped me deal with my problems. It came back because of the pressure I was under. When Remnant leaders found out I had a therapist they told me I should drop her, because they do not believe in any kind of counselling outside of the fellowship.

“After six months I was starting to realise something was wrong with the church, but it was so difficult to leave. I knew people would make my life difficult, pressurising me to stay with phone calls and making me feel guilty because you can't speak out or question anything.

“The diet was making me binge more and more, so I ended up putting on 20lbs, instead of losing weight. No one in our class was losing any weight at all.”

### *'Friends were lost forever'*

Eventually Laura became so fed up, she hatched a plan to find out more about the people who ran the church. With two other members of her local group, she arranged a visit to the headquarters in Nashville, where Gwen films the webcasts.

“As soon as we arrived, I was convinced I was right. It all seemed so false. Everyone had a smile on their face – the same smile that Gwen wore in the DVDs. They looked like Stepford wives.

“In five days, we weren't alone for five minutes. It seemed as if they didn't want us to think about things and start doubting it all.

“In person, Gwen struck me as very different to the sweet likeable lady on the telecast. She was walking around the room, as if to spot anyone who was dissenting and frighten you into smiling back at her.

“As soon as we got back to Los Angeles I quit Remnant. I started getting calls from people trying to talk me round and one leader even drove for three hours to try to change my mind.

“It took me six months to start getting my friends and family back. But some of my friends were lost forever.

“At one point I even felt so low that I thought life wasn't worth living, and I considered suicide, but I realised that if I did, they'd won.”

Laura joined Spiritwatch, an American anti-cult organisation which offers advice and help to victims of rip-off religions. Gradually, she started to put her life back together.

“I went to see my therapist and began fighting my bulimia again. Now it's completely gone and I am living a much healthier lifestyle,” says Laura. “I eat normally and exercise if I want to lose a few pounds, but I'll never join a slimming group again.” \*

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