

It's a story that Orange County resident Jach Pursel has told probably hundreds of times: Sitting quietly on his bed one day in 1974, he slipped deep into meditation as his wife watched. Then words spilled from his lips, and **Lazaris** made his first appearance through Pursel.

For nearly three decades, Pursel has claimed to communicate, or channel, information from the "nonphysical entity" he said is called **Lazaris** (pronounced La-ZAR-is).

He has built a million-dollar business, Concept Synergy, around **Lazaris** -- a being that no one has ever seen. Since 1974, followers have shelled out money for **Lazaris** seminars, videotapes, audiotapes, books, calendars and music CDs.

Followers say **Lazaris** has taught them about love and friendship, but the mystery and intrigue surrounding Pursel have provided fuel for his detractors. Much of the skepticism stems from the 2001 accidental death of Pursel's ex-wife and the suicide of her husband the same day at the secluded southwest Orange County compound the trio shared.

Pursel, who still lives at the waterfront compound near Walt Disney World, remains undaunted by his critics. His followers -- whom he says are mostly doctors, lawyers and business people -- are pleased with the lessons they learn from **Lazaris**, Pursel said.

"The criticisms are either very bizarre or untrue. Some people are jealous and envious," said Pursel, 56. "I'm not going to give it any energy. If other people reading those detractions decide they don't want anything to do with **Lazaris** or Concept Synergy, then good, they probably wouldn't have a good time anyway."

Born John W. Pursel, he later changed his first name to Jach as a believer in numerology -- the idea that numbers corresponding with certain letters can influence a person's life. Pursel said he attended the University of Michigan and, at age 20, married his childhood sweetheart, Peny Lake. He went to work as a claims adjuster for State Farm Insurance and was advancing to management, he said.

That was when **Lazaris** entered their lives. In 1972, after his wife read a Cosmopolitan article about Silva Mind Control -- a program that claims to develop clairvoyance and memory, among other things -- he attended a course and learned to meditate. "It wasn't something that I did particularly well. I mostly fell asleep," Pursel said.

Pursel said that in October 1974, while living in Lakeland, he was meditating with his wife sitting by his side and started speaking with a foreign accent. He identified himself to Peny as **Lazaris**. Pursel said he never remembers his channeling sessions, but his wife recorded the sessions with handwritten notes and tape recordings.

Peny Pursel told her husband after the first channeling session that **Lazaris** had never taken a physical form but had come through Jach Pursel to be closer to her.

In the years to follow, "tens of thousands of people have found their friendships with **Lazaris**," Pursel said on his Web site **Lazaris.com**. They have paid hundreds of dollars for one-on-one sessions, group workshops or videotapes of Pursel channeling **Lazaris** and preaching love, friendship and inner peace.

#### A SPARK OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Believers say **Lazaris** is a good friend who offers sound advice about life through workshops with titles such as "Developing Self-Confidence" and "Forgiving Yourself."

In the Awakening the Love video made in 1985, Pursel, speaking as **Lazaris**, explained who **Lazaris** is: "We are a spark of consciousness -- a spark of consciousness that does not have a form. Content without form."

Therefore to talk with you we use this body, we use this mechanism so as to let you know we're communicating with you so that you know we are all the same."

In 1979, Pursel moved Concept Synergy -- the business behind the being -- from Florida to California, where the New Age movement was taking off. During the next decade, celebrities touted him. Actress Sharon Gless thanked him in her 1987 Emmy acceptance speech. Actress Shirley MacLaine lauded **Lazaris** as her "spiritual guide and teacher" in her 1987 book *It's All in the Playing*.

About the same time, Pursel and his wife divorced and she married Michael North, a Concept Synergy business partner, who later changed his name to Michael North, also for numerology purposes. Instead of breaking up the partnership, Pursel and Peny and Michael North became closer. They shared homes, bank accounts and work.

"The three of us had a connection. It was not a menage a trois, as some people suspected. It worked well. We shared everything; all the properties and other things were in all our names," Pursel said.

In 1988, with the cost of living skyrocketing in California, Pursel moved his business to Palm Beach.

In 1997 they moved to Orlando because, Pursel said, they liked the positive energy surrounding Central Florida. They lived in a four-house compound surrounded by a concrete privacy fence on a private road called Penny Lane Drive.

According to property records, the largest house is a two-story home listed on the Orange County tax rolls as worth \$4.2 million. That home, which belonged to Peny and Michael North, is about 20,000 square feet with six bedrooms and 10 bathrooms.

It was in that home that the couple died hours apart in 2001.

On May 9, 2001, investigators were called to the house to find Peny North, 54, dead in a wheelchair. Michael North, 55, told authorities that his 313-pound wife had been in pain for weeks, taking codeine every two hours and drinking vodka to relieve the pain. Her death was determined to be an accident. She had toxic levels of codeine and aspirin in her system and was not able to metabolize the drugs fast enough because of her weight and myriad health problems, according to an Orange County Sheriff's investigative report.

Hours later Michael North was found dead in a lounge chair at the screened-in pool. The Orange County medical examiner determined his death was a suicide from nitrous oxide poisoning. His suicide note said he didn't want to go on without his wife of 24 years, Orange County sheriff's investigators said.

Michael and Peny North left a combined \$6.2 million in assets to Pursel, according to their wills.

#### WEB SITE FOR SKEPTICS

Peny and Michael North's deaths stunned Pursel's -- and **Lazaris'** -- fans.

Unaware that Peny North was so gravely ill, many followers questioned why **Lazaris** couldn't predict, or prevent, the deaths or help Peny overcome her health problems. Looking for answers, some turned to a Web site dedicated to skeptics.

The site, cosmicfool.com, was started in September 2000 by Katie Dean and Ted Vollmer. For 12 years they considered **Lazaris** a "loving, good-humored entity giving logical, common-sense information" and traveled to seminars and bought **Lazaris** audio- and videotapes. But they started questioning their relationship with **Lazaris** after witnessing Peny North's backbiting of some followers on the **Lazaris** Web message board, Vollmer said. They thought she should have been above that because of her close relationship with **Lazaris**.

"We were questioning and wanted to get other people's feedback," Vollmer said. "We wanted to see if anybody else was questioning."

Craig B., 46, of Lancaster, Pa., who doesn't want his last name used for fear of repercussions from work, spent more than a decade following **Lazaris**. Peny North's death was "a big red flag," he says.

"According to **Lazaris**, Peny was the most spiritually advanced soul," Craig, a computer software programmer, said from his home. "Then why would she die the way she did, especially since she had unlimited access to **Lazaris**?"

James Randi, a former magician who is known worldwide for debunking claims of the supernatural, paranormal and occult, said channelers such as Pursel are scam artists who eventually retire when "they get fabulously wealthy."

"These people are vultures. They sit and wait for the weak and vulnerable and eat them up," he said from his Fort Lauderdale office. "They don't offer any evidence. They don't offer any proof. They just ask people to believe."

But longtime followers say such criticism is motivated by jealousy.

Susannah Nathan, 58, moved to Orlando in 2001 from the Miami area to be closer to the **Lazaris** workshops. Nathan, who formerly worked in human resources for a large computer company and owned a holistic healing center, said that in the past decade she has received sound, practical advice about spirituality and life.

Now, Nathan teaches and lectures about holistic healing. She considers **Lazaris** a "private part of my spirituality."

"**Lazaris** isn't for everybody," she said from her Orlando home. "Not everybody wants to look at how they're creating their life and get in touch with how to change it."

Helen and Andrew Avalon of Orlando said they first saw a **Lazaris** videotape in 1986 and they felt as though they were getting sensible advice about work and their personal lives. They moved to Central Florida in 1998 from California, in part to be closer to the workshops.

Helen Avalon said she and her husband, a construction claims consultant, consider **Lazaris** a good friend. Helen Avalon, who works with her husband as a data analyst, said they were skeptical at first, but that quickly passed.

"I think that skepticism is very healthy," she said. "**Lazaris** has so much wisdom and so much insight, the likes of which I haven't seen anywhere else."

At a recent workshop in Orlando, about 500 participants lined up at the grand ballroom at the Caribe Royale Resort near Disney. Many paid \$50 for a Thursday-night seminar or \$325 for the Saturday and Sunday seminar.

When Pursel walked in, participants dashed to their seats. All eyes were on the distinguished-looking, silver-haired man wearing a simple blue shirt and khaki pants as he moved to his podium.

Sitting on a low chair, his face expressionless and hands folded in his lap, Pursel clenched his eyes and his head fell forward as he appeared to slip deep into meditation. The crowd was motionless.

Nearly a minute of silence passed before Pursel lifted his head to reveal a bright, toothy grin. His eyes still clenched, **Lazaris** spoke his first words in an accent that sounded somewhat Scottish -- nothing like Pursel's Midwestern voice.

Around the room, some **Lazaris** followers clutched crystals, which are thought to carry energy, while others furiously scrawled his words on notepads as they settled in for the five-hour lecture.

"All right, all right, all right. Well, well, well. Oh my, yes, yes. It is with great joy and deep reverence that we come to you this evening," **Lazaris** started, waving his arms in the air. "As it always is, it is a pleasure and a delight to be with you . . ."