

# Alleged victims of Shiva School of Meditation and Yoga were previously sexually assaulted

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Psychologist Nigel Denning. *Photo: Josh Robenstone*

Many women at a Melbourne ashram at the centre of a sex scandal joined the group seeking healing after surviving rape and sexual assaults elsewhere, advocates say.

Fairfax Media reported on Monday that Mornington Peninsula's sexual offences and child abuse investigation team were investigating the Shiva School of Meditation and Yoga at Mount Eliza after a number of victims reported alleged abuse there.

It can be revealed that many of the alleged victims were particularly vulnerable, having turned to the ashram and its spiritual teachings to help them with their own personal problems.

Swami Shankarananda, American-born Russell Michael Kruckman, had 'secret sexual relations' with residents of the school.

The school's former treasurer, Dan Conquest, had lived at the ashram for about 11½ years when he left last year, days after hearing about Swami Shankarananda's "tantric practices" with members through a friend.

He was shocked because he believed the Swami was celibate and eventually left because he did not want to "passively condone" what he believed to be sexual abuse at the ashram.

He said that the Shiva School has threatened to sue at least one whistleblower for defamation if they continued to discuss sex abuse allegations, and a number of people have left the Shiva School since it was revealed the centre's former director, Swami Shankarananda, American-born Russell Michael Kruckman, had had "secret sexual relations" with residents last year.

Nigel Denning, a counselling psychologist and owner of an East Melbourne private psychology practice, started going to the Mt Eliza ashram about a decade ago and regularly attended its meditation classes.

In August last year some of his fellow students started confiding to him allegations of emotional, psychological and sexual manipulation at the hands of the school's director, Swami Shankarananda.

Mr Denning stopped attending classes immediately and advised these students to report it to the police: "It was a shocking, appalling situation," he says. Mr Denning did not approach the school directly at the request of the alleged victims.

Some of the women were survivors of rape and sexual assault and were already highly vulnerable when they arrived at the yoga school, he said.

Helen Last, chief executive of victims' support group In Good Faith and Associates, has spoken to about 38 alleged primary and secondary victims of the Shiva School. Ms Last said many victims had previously been raped or sexually assaulted and had drug or mental health problems before they joined the ashram.

"They went [to the ashram] seeking something for their wellbeing and have found that they have been deceived and betrayed and sexually oppressed as part of the teachings."

Ms Last said she was not critical of the Hindu teachings themselves, but of "where it's been used to confuse women to make them totally naive and subservient - including providing regular sexual service."

Psychologist Mr Denning said one of the public processes at the ashram was called "shiva inquiry", where people were "shamed" for having negative emotions, he said.

He was told this process was also used in private: when women expressed guilt or shame about having a sexual relationship with someone at the school, they would be told they had the wrong "spiritual understanding".

Mr Denning has been running support groups for people who have left the ashram, as well as offering counselling.

The sexual practices were confirmed at a prayer meeting in December. A board member of the residential ashram - which has about 500 members and up to 40 residents - announced the ashram was aware of sexual allegations against Swami Shankarananda.

Mr Conquest said leaders accused a member of the community of "spreading lies" about the sexual relations. He confronted them, asking them what the truth was but was given an ambiguous response.

"Then we heard through first hand accounts from women who had bad experiences and that's when we realised ...it had crossed a line," he said.

"There was coercion, [an abuser] was really unrelenting...after they said no, he would continually pursue them in different ways saying, 'This will be good for you, you have to surrender.'"

Since then about 60 per cent of the ashram's members and eight residents had left. He was concerned for the 20 people who still lived there.

Shiva School's lawyer, David Galbally, QC, said he would not be providing any comment at this time. Swami Shankarananda's lawyer, Paul Galbally, also declined to comment, saying it was inappropriate while the police investigation continued.

The ashram last year released a statement to members saying it was aware the swami had had "secret sexual relations" with a number of women over time but he had never claimed to be a sexual renunciant or demanded celibacy from his disciples.