



Ariel Hammon, wives Helen and Lisa, and nine of their 10 children watch TV in 2008 in their house in Centennial Park, Ariz.

# I THEY WED

POLYGAMOUS MEMBERS OF UTAH CROSSFIT AFFILIATE EXPLAIN THEIR CONTROVERSIAL VIEWS ON PLURAL MARRIAGES. **WRITTEN BY CHRIS COOPER**

## ONE MAN'S SIN IS ANOTHER MAN'S COMMANDMENT.

Though illegal, polygamy is still practiced in Utah, Arizona and other small pockets of the United States. Driven from the public eye, plural marriages are often the subject of scorn and always under legal suspicion.

Though most polygamous groups are Mormon, they've been disavowed by their own church and call themselves Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) or other names. They still follow the teachings of the *Book of Mormon* and Joseph Smith, including his most infamous revelation: recommended marrying of multiple wives. But not all polygamous groups are the same.

"When we get publicity, it's always negative, and everyone always thinks that it's basically the same religion," said Lorin Zitting of the Works of Jesus Christ Church. "Everyone thinks that there's child abuse or underage marriage in polygamy. That's not a part of polygamy. It may be a part of some extreme versions of polygamy."

In addition to polygamy, Smith instructed Mormons to take care of their bodies, as well as their souls. Polygamous families in Southern Utah have followed his instructions, they believe, in the best possible way, and the desire to care for the body as a vessel for the soul has led Lorin and his two brothers, Roy and Allen, to CrossFit.

### UNITED BY COMMON GROUND, DIVIDED BY MOUNTAINS

*"There's no such thing as a fundamentalist Mormon." — Elder M. Russell Ballard*

Smith officially founded the Mormon Church in 1830, and his doctrine stressed that Latter-Day Saints (LDS) members should maintain a personal dialogue with God. Predictably, this has led to private commandments and revelations that can contradict one another, as well as shifting doctrine catalogued in the **Book of Commandments**.

On July 12, 1843, Smith received a revelation from God that created two new Mormon practices: baptism of the dead and polygamy. The second, Smith said, was not only permissible but in certain cases required. Mormons were immediately divided by the pronouncement. Not surprisingly, Smith's wife was against the idea. One of Smith's lieutenants, Brigham Young, stated he would rather die, though his tune would later change and he would eventually accumulate more than 50 wives. Smith's wife, Emma, was soon ordered expressly by God—through another revelation—to accept polygamy.

The practice of plural marriage ostracized the young church from other churches and the majority of the American public. Chased west by anti-Mormon protests, brawls and shootouts, Young led the Latter-Day Saints to Utah after Smith's death.



The barren landscape sheltered early Mormons from the dangers left behind, including the U.S. Army and the judgment of other churches. Here, they multiplied—and divided.

Although both Smith and Young, his eventual successor, were practicing polygamists, the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has banned the practice. Mainstream LDS followers officially renounced polygamy on Oct. 6, 1890. Wilford Woodruff, then president of the LDS, issued a **manifesto** that the church ratified to conform to the laws of the United States. Official Declaration 1 of the LDS begins, “The *Bible* and the *Book of Mormon* teach that monogamy is God’s standard for marriage unless He declares otherwise.”

Mormonism is among the **fastest-growing** religions in the world, with followers of the LDS faith numbering in the tens of millions. Fractious groups, calling themselves “Fundamentalist” Mormons, have split from the main body and each other dozens of times.

The splits are caused by disagreements over the finer points of Mormon doctrine, interpersonal conflicts and sometimes the voice of God. Occasionally the breaks are violent. And no principle of the church has been more divisive than polygamy: the practice of “plural” marriage. In other words, two girls for every boy. Or more.

## NO PRINCIPLE OF THE CHURCH HAS BEEN MORE DIVISIVE THAN THE PRACTICE OF POLYGAMY.

Polygamy has been illegal in the United States since the **Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862**. Few have ever been prosecuted under the law. Abraham Lincoln signed the act but didn’t allocate any funds for enforcing the law in Utah.

He was worried the LDS would become involved in the Civil War—against the Union—and famously compared the Mormon church to a log he’d encountered on his farm: “Too hard to split, too wet to burn and too heavy to move, so we plow around it. That’s what I intend to do with the Mormons.”

In general terms, polygamy is a marriage with two or more partners, while bigamy is the criminal act of marrying one person while still legally married to another. Anti-polygamy laws were among the first tests of the *Constitution’s* protection of religious freedom. The Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

When polygamist George Reynolds took the practice of polygamy to the Supreme Court in 1878, it **ruled**, “Laws are made for the government of actions, and while they cannot interfere with mere religious beliefs and opinions, they may with practices.”

In 1882, anti-bigamy laws were given teeth by the Edmunds Act, which prohibited “unlawful cohabitation,” removing the need to prove that multiple formal marriages had occurred. The act made cohabitation between two people of the opposite sex a misdemeanor, and 1,300 LDS men were imprisoned. No others living in cohabitation in Utah at the time were imprisoned; LDS members were clearly targeted. In 1896, following the Mormon Church’s polygamy ban, Utah was finally admitted to the Union on the condition that polygamy would forever be prohibited in the state.

The Edmunds Act was tested in 2012 by Kody Brown and his four wives, made famous by the television show *Sister Wives*. Brown won, and cohabitation in Utah was decriminalized. In an essay in **The Washington Post**, lead counsel Jonathon Turley quoted Judge Clark Waddoups as saying the courts today are “less inclined to allow majoritarian coercion of unpopular or disliked minority groups, especially when blatant racism ... religious prejudice, or some





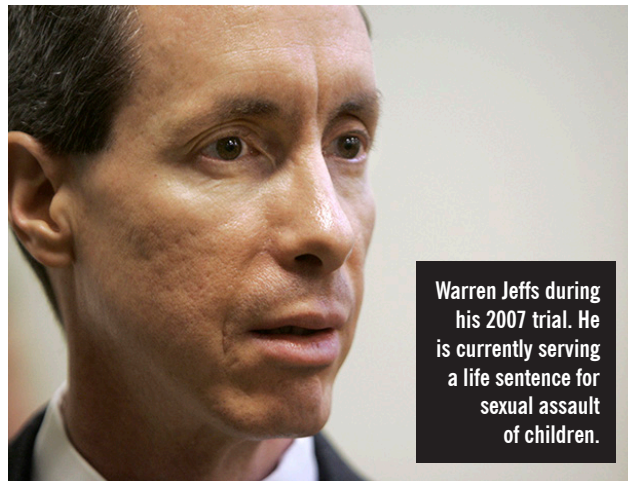
other constitutionally suspect motivation, can be discovered behind such legislation.”

The ruling means a person can only be charged with bigamy if seeking multiple marriage licenses. Because marriage licenses aren’t sought for “celestial marriages,” as they are called, no laws are broken, according to Waddoups. Joined under God but not under law, women in celestial marriages in Utah are recognized as unwed mothers, and social benefits are extended accordingly.

## THE EXTREME END OF THE SPECTRUM

In any situation, fringe groups often achieve disproportionate notoriety, and when it comes to polygamy, the Jeffs family, in particular, has faced public outrage for decades.

Beginning with Rulon Jeffs, called “Uncle Rulon” by members of his FLDS sect, the family tradition of repression and intermarriage has been well documented. Rulon’s son Warren took up the mantle upon his father’s death in 2002. In 2011, Jeffs was convicted of aggravated sexual assault and sexual assault of a child, and he’s currently serving a sentence of life plus 20 years. He still controls his FLDS church from inside the walls of prison near Palestine, Texas.



In 1986, the Zittings’ group broke away from Jeffs’ family. “It was Warren’s dad—he was one of the priests of council, and there was a dispute over doctrine. Half the group went this way, half the group went the other,” said Roy. Some of his older half-sisters are still members of Jeffs’ group.

Believing they’re upholding the true will of God, some polygamists maintain they’re not accountable to “worldly”

laws. Some are prepared to die for their beliefs. A few have killed for them.

In 2003, a 911 operator received a late-night call from a truck stop in Northern Utah. The young girl on the line told a horrific story: She was fleeing an uncle who had “married” her at the age of 16. On previous attempts to run away, she had been caught and whipped by her father. Then another story, barely a year later: Thomas Arthur Green, another Utah polygamist, was charged with bigamy and felony rape of a child.

“WE BELIEVE THAT THIS IS  
HOW GOD LIVES.”

—ROY ZITTING

In 2002, Ruth Stubbs—19 and pregnant with her third child—fled the compound of Rodney Holm, her husband since the age of 16. Holm was also married to Stubbs’ older sister and worked as a police officer nearby. Elizabeth Smart was abducted at knifepoint when she was 14 to become the “celestial wife” of Brian David Mitchell. Held captive and sometimes chained to a tree close enough to hear search parties calling her name, Smart was eventually brainwashed to become a compliant concubine. She was rescued when a passing motorist recognized Mitchell from an episode of *America’s Most Wanted*.

Some groups, such as Jeffs’ clan, remain hidden by choice. Slowly shrinking, the group continues to fragment, and Jeffs’ followers have trouble recruiting new wives.

According to Jon Krakauer in *Under the Banner of Heaven*, there are more than 30,000 Mormon polygamists living in North America, which is less than 1 percent of worldwide LDS membership.

“You have to understand in Utah there’s probably 20 different groups of FLDS. There’s one group that gets the spotlight—Jeffs’—and everybody tends to group us all together,” Roy said.

Pursued by the law, condemned by the public and sensationalized by media seeking to capitalize on a social oddity, polygamists are usually forced to hide their beliefs. Children of plural marriages are ostracized by their peers. So why do it at all?



Roy Zitting has the answer:

“We believe that this is how God lives, and we believe that we can become gods, and we’re going to have to learn to live that way if we’re going to.”

## ONE MIGHTY AND STRONG

“And it shall come to pass that I, the Lord God, will send one mighty and strong ... to set in order the house of God.”—*The Doctrine and Covenants, Section 85*

Roy has more in common with the average CrossFit athlete than with the polygamists shown on television: he wears sweatpants and Under Armor, works at a construction company and drinks alcohol.

He loves deadlifting, he’s learning to love double-unders, and he wants to be free to practice his own religion without persecution. He believes in polygamy but doesn’t want his Works of Jesus Christ church lumped together with the FLDS, and he’s eager to unravel the tangled belief system that’s confusing even to some Mormons.

Even in the small 5:30-a.m. group at CrossFit 435 in Hurricane, Utah, different values within the Mormon church are on display. Owner Ryan Wright is a practicing Mormon who’s never tasted alcohol but blasts uncensored rap during the workout.

Though describing himself as fundamentalist, Roy and his family are looser on rules about drinking than most mainstream Latter-Day Saints.

“We’re trying to purify our body and soul,” said Roy. “We believe in moderation.”

“LDS says absolutely no alcohol, no caffeine. But they can hit Diet Coke as hard as they want, and that’s worse for you than alcohol,” he said. “We believe in trying to maintain a balance. Sure, have a drink, but don’t get hammered. If you’re going to get drunk, do it once a year at New Year’s or something. But sure, have a glass of wine with dinner.”

Different groups, Roy said, are tougher or looser on different parts of Mormon doctrine. Drinking for most LDS followers is a no-no, but swearing might be OK.



“Last night, (the stereo in the gym) was dropping the F-bomb, and some of the guys are LDS, looking around like, ‘Is someone going to stop that?’” Roy said.

In comparison, Roy said the Works of Jesus Christ church is more relaxed about drinking and swearing.

**“OUR BODIES ARE SACRED TO US. THAT MEANS WE TRY TO KEEP THEM FIT.”**

**—ROY ZITTING**

“We’re probably more open-minded than most polygamist groups. If someone from Warren’s group got caught working out down here (at CrossFit 435), they’d be kicked out (of Jeffs’ group). It’s devilish music, or something, I don’t know. He’d find a reason. He’s a control freak.”

Underneath Roy’s gym clothes are the long sleeves of the “Mormon garment,” a long-limbed set of underwear some Mormons wear at all times.

“We try to stick to the fundamental principles of Mormonism. That’s why the long sleeves,” Roy said after the workout.

“Mormons believe in being ‘in the world, but not of it,’ and the garment helps in privately yet consistently setting temple-going Mormons apart from the world,” according to the [ldschurchtemples.com](http://ldschurchtemples.com) website.

“We all wear the same—we call it ‘the five bones,’” Roy said.

“Here, here, here,” he said as he pointed to fabric poking out near his collarbone and wrists, “and ankles to keep ourselves covered.”

Zitting’s family believes their bodies are the image of God. As such, they prioritize health and fitness.

“At least with our community, our group, we’re physically fit. We believe that you get one chance, one body,” Roy

said. “We believe in keeping our bodies covered. Our bodies are sacred to us. That means we try to keep them fit, eat right, no tattoos, no piercings.”

It also means respectful dress in a more conventional sense: the long dresses and bonnets customary to some FLDS groups aren’t part of the Zittings’ wardrobe.

**“I BELIEVE IN EVERYBODY’S RIGHT TO LIVE THE WAY THEY WANT TO LIVE, NOT JUST MY OWN.”**

**—LORIN ZITTING**

“I’ll go through Walmart and there’ll be one of Warren’s group going through the cash register next to me—this has happened—and the woman checking me out will say, ‘Those polygamists, I can spot them anywhere.’ So they do group us all together,” said Roy.

“The myth is that everyone that’s practicing polygamy is the same group or (has) the same ideas,” Lorin said. “Everyone that doesn’t understand something tends to group people together like that.”

Lorin and Roy each have one wife—for now. Both insist they’re not out seeking other women. But they’re both leaving the door open. Though central to FLDS doctrine, polygamy isn’t the focus of Roy’s faith.

“Polygamy’s not going to save you. You have to do the character work. It’s not just marrying some girl, you know. I think a lot of people do it for the wrong reasons,” he said. “Maybe peer pressure: their dad does it and they want to be like him. They’re born into it so they just do it too.”

## FAMILY TIES

Polygamy is a flashpoint topic, but other values, such as the belief that hard work builds character, are far less controversial. Roy learned about work ethic as a child: His father struggled to feed his large family but wouldn’t accept welfare. When a neighbor traded them a block of “welfare cheese” for bread, his father threw it away.

“He didn’t want any part of welfare or government aid. He said, ‘If you can’t afford more kids, don’t have them,’” Roy recalled.

Roy’s family owns a large construction company, and with its growth came more time behind a desk. That led Zitting to CrossFit 435. Roy’s wife doesn’t do CrossFit as often as he does because they live 40 minutes away, but he says she’d come more often if it was closer. Roy is willing to work hard to achieve physical and spiritual fitness, and while he may not refer to his workouts as “heavenly,” he can certainly understand why many who follow the CrossFit doctrine refer to other members as their “gym family.”

Members of a gym, though, can cancel a membership if they want to quit. How does anyone—especially a woman—leave a polygamous family? And why join one in the first place?

“Nobody’s forced to do it,” Roy said.

“If there’s anyone who is unhappy, we’re happy to help them get out. The women that don’t want it, they’ll leave. It’s not like we try to force it on anybody,” echoed Lorin, whose first wife left him because she didn’t want to be part of the religion. The two are still friends and split time with their kids.

“I’ve done everything I can to help her go be what she wants to be. It’s not for everybody. I believe in everybody’s right to live the way they want to live, not just my own,” Lorin said.

**“I CAN’T BE OUT CHASING GIRLS OR YOU’RE GOING TO MESS UP THE FIRST RELATIONSHIP.”**

**—ROY ZITTING**

He added: “I loved that girl. I still love her.”

Lorin started CrossFit after his divorce and credits the workouts with helping him cope with the separation. Now remarried, he and his new wife will continue in the polygamous tradition.

“I married somebody that’s committed like I am. She’s committed to the religion. She feels the same way I do,” he said.

This commitment must be stronger than laws and base human emotions such as jealousy. Lorin credited an



Members of the Zitting family grew up in a polygamous household and now care for their bodies at CrossFit 435 in Utah.

Chris Cooper/CrossFit Journal





Roy Zitting (third from right) enjoys burpees as much as any other athlete.

Chris Cooper/CrossFit Journal

emphasis on personal responsibility that's reinforced by his church, and he said that multiple marriages aren't simply part of the pursuit of a more diverse sex life.

"With us, it's about family. We're committed to our relationships wholeheartedly," he said.

The experience of dealing with multiple relationships at once, though, isn't an easy one. In some FLDS communities, womens' opinions aren't considered. But in Lorin's family, everyone's personality is active in full force.

"Tell me how hard you think it would be for you and your wife to have a relationship with another woman," he said. "For a guy, you could never do anything right. Someone's going to be mad at the guy all the time. It helps you to grow, in my opinion, to have to deal with that type of relationship. It's an experience you just can't get with just one wife."

He added: "It's not about sex. There's easier ways to get a lot of sex."

For Roy, family dynamics are an important consideration.

"We're not out actively trying to seek wives. At least I'm not. If that comes about, it's gotta happen the right way or it's going to screw up the first marriage, you know what I'm

saying? I can't be out chasing girls or you're going to mess up the first relationship," he said.

Roy said communication and commitment are key to making polygamy work.

"Both (partners) have to be very involved to do it right. I mean, I can be an asshole and go out and chase a girl and bring her home and say, 'Here it is, work with it,' but it's not going to work out. But it happens," he said.

Roy also believes FLDS marriages, singular or plural, are more likely to succeed than most.

"We actually have a much lower divorce rate. I think the national average is 55 percent or something," he said. "We're maybe 7 or 8 percent."

Lorin, Roy and Allen all have the same father, who had multiple wives. None will discuss how many.

"Take my dad's family. He takes the advice of the ladies, but he makes a final decision. It's like a judge panel in the Supreme Court," Roy said. "There's a judge that has a little more pull than the rest. But a lot of guys are off working all day or all week, and the ladies gotta run the house. It's not like (a) do-what-I-say-or-else type of household."

## GROWING UP POLYGAMIST

Marlyne Hammon, 60, is a sixth-generation polygamist Mormon. A payroll clerk for the public school system in Colorado City, Ariz., Hammon has been married for 44 years. Hammon knew her husband would have other wives when she married him. She now calls them her "sister wives," and she said she looked forward to having them as part of her culture.

Hammon said each brought a new dimension into their family. There are now four wives in the house.

"This is one of the amazing things about a plural family: You have so many different personalities, natures and talents it makes your life so much more fully faceted," she said.

In 1953, Arizona Gov. Howard Pyle organized a raid on the polygamous community of Short Creek. A total of 263 children were seized, declared wards of the state and placed in foster care. Hammon was one of the children taken in that raid.

"I was an infant at the time of the 1953 raid. The mothers and children were all taken away from home ... . They

were going to adopt all the children out and destroy the records," she said.

Short Creek had been raided in 1935 and 1944. In the '53 roundup, Hammon and the others were spared only because laws in Arizona prohibited the adoption of a child without the consent of both parents.

In such an atmosphere, many children of modern polygamous households have grown up hiding their religion and sometimes hiding their homes. Hammon's grandfather and others in her family have gone to jail for polygamy.

"And so we were in that mode of just, 'Keep your mouth shut, fly under the radar.' Not because we wanted to commit crimes but because we wanted to protect our families," she said.

**"I THINK THE CLIMATE HAS CHANGED. IT'S NOT LIKE WE'RE A BUNCH OF CRIMINAL FAMILIES HIDING IN THE DARK."**

**—MARLYNE HAMMON**

Small slip-ups in public could give the government occasion to arrest polygamous men. Hammon recounts one story of two men charged with carrying a woman across state lines for "immoral purposes." According to Hammon, the men were simply giving a plural wife a ride from Utah to Short Creek to visit her family. Hammon said the men were arrested and charged by Arizona troopers even though they actually had the woman get out and walk across the state line herself. Hammon said they eventually went to prison.

Hammon points to political haymaking as a major problem for Mormons, particularly when Lincoln's Republican party introduced an 1856 platform featuring harsh attacks on the "twin relics of barbarism": slavery and polygamy. She believes poor journalism only made things worse.

"Their lack of knowledge created a fear, and of course they dreamed up all kinds of things," she said.

Hammon admitted there have been cases of abuse in polygamous families but points out the same problems occur in monogamous families. Still, social stigma is more liberally applied to polygamists, and the temptation to hide away from public scrutiny is great. Hammon and the



Marlyne Hammon works with the Centennial Park Action Committee to dispel myths about polygamy.

Courtesy of Marlyne Hammon





Roy Zitting currently has one wife, though he isn't against the idea of more.

Susie Stout

Zittings have decided change can only come through openness and aren't hiding their practices.

Hammon belongs to the **Centennial Park Action Committee** (CPAC), a political group she helped organize in 2003. The group interacts openly with journalists, government officials and lawmakers in an attempt to present “a correct view of the polygamous lifestyle as practiced in Centennial Park.” The site clearly states the community is not part of the FLDS.

In August 2003, Hammon and a hundred women showed up unannounced to a “polygamy summit” held in St. George, Utah. The summit was a project of the attorneys general of Utah and Arizona, and Hammon knew coming forward was a risk.

“We didn't have a guarantee that they wouldn't put us in irons and put us behind bars because we're criminals, but we cannot—we could not—let the untruths stand any longer. We had to protest. ... We decided we had to stand up and talk and define ourselves,” Hammon said.

Declaring yourself a polygamist remains risky. She and members of her family experienced seizure, arrest and social isolation, so it would be far easier for her to keep to herself. She's openly breaking a law that dates back to Abraham Lincoln. But as the Edmunds Act begins to crack with age, Hammon stands fast in her beliefs, and she's excited about the “*Sister Wives* ruling” in Utah.

“What they tried to do was say that we were living in bigamy because we just call each other ‘husband and wife’ in a religious ceremony,” she said. “We were not trying to be legal under the state. Only one wife has a legal marriage license.

“They tried to say, ‘You do call her a wife, so you live in bigamy, and for that you have to be prosecuted.’ And this ruling changed that—which is big.”

She continued: “I think the climate has changed. It's not like we're a bunch of criminal families hiding in the dark and trying to abuse ourselves. They understand or are coming to understand that we're just normal people and this is the way we choose to live our lives.”



While many polygamous families hide their practices, the Zittings and Marlyne Hammon are sharing their views in hopes of greater understanding.

George Frey/Getty Images

Lorin Zitting agrees.

“When you're a kid, people look down on you for being different. I was almost ashamed of what I was just because of the way people treated me. The older I get, the more proud I am of what I am. I don't have to hide what I am. It creates happiness in my life; it creates joy. It's not something I feel I should have to hide or be ashamed of.”

## JUDGE NOT?

If practiced by consenting adults, does polygamy hurt anyone?

Is it morally wrong—and if so, by whose morals?

Are polygamist families bad or just different?

The law will determine the criminality of Hammon and the Zittings. Regardless of court rulings, they're willing to continue openly disobeying laws they believe are unjust.

Do a partner workout with Roy Zitting, and you wouldn't know he comes from a polygamist family. Every day,

CrossFit, the Great Sweating Pot, brings together people of different religion, race and politics. When a guy can do a hundred double-unders to build the team total, his beliefs outside the gym seem less important.

Is it a sin to judge him?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Cooper is a writer for CrossFit. He owns **CrossFit Catalyst** in Sault Ste. Marie, Canada.