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ONE DOLLAR

NOVEMBER 19, 1979

NEW YORK

THE STRANGE MISTRESS OF ODYSSEY HOUSE

How Judianne Densen-Gerber
Manipulates Junkies,
Politicians,
And Millionaires



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The Mysterious Mistress Of Odyssey House

By Lucy Komisar

“...‘I have very little pity, very little compassion,’ says Dr. Judianne Densen-Gerber, creator of a drug-treatment empire...”

It was an elegant affair. Some 600 guests, in black tie and evening gowns, gathered in the Grand Ballroom of the Hilton to pay homage to former Governor Nelson Rockefeller for his support of the Odyssey House drug-treatment program. Frank Gifford was the emcee, and Julie Newmar lent theatrical glitter. The rich and well-connected crowd had paid \$100 a plate to help Odyssey House get junkies off the streets and rehabilitate their lives.

But that stellar evening was nearly six years ago. And the passage of time has not been kind. Today, Odyssey House and its creator, Dr. Judianne Densen-Gerber, are in deep trouble. The program is rapidly losing its once remarkable clout with government officials. Turmoil seems to be wracking the program from within: Last month, an Odyssey advisory committee resigned in the wake of news reports and investigations of the center's treatment practices and financial management. Former staff members and patients have recently come forward with bi-

Lucy Komisar is a reporter for the Record in Bergen County. Dr. Densen-Gerber, after an initial interview, declined a follow-up interview for this article.

zarre tales of cult-like practices and abuse. And State Attorney General Robert Abrams has stepped in, opening an official inquiry into Odyssey House affairs. It's a long way from the Hilton gala.

Still, most people think of Odyssey House as a solid, benevolent program. Since 1966, it has operated therapeutic communities for drug addicts in New York and expanded its operations to seven other cities and Australia. Dr. Densen-Gerber, the 45-year-old founder and guiding force behind this network, has also emerged as an influential spokeswoman for sexually abused children. Today, she has become a familiar figure at public forums and legislative functions, detailing the horrors of addiction and ill-treated youngsters. She will appear at a state hearing, a twelve-year-old heroin user on her knee, pleading for money to save such youngsters. The cameras whir and the lawmakers reach for the handkerchiefs and appropriations. It's a good show, one that has won her and her program praise from the media over the years. As a *Cosmopolitan* article reported earlier this year, “Few clinics can boast an atmosphere so humane—so caring—as

the refuge Dr. Densen-Gerber has created here at Odyssey House.”

But there is another side to this tale, one which is only slowly beginning to emerge.

It is December 1976. Dr. Densen-Gerber is seated behind her desk at an Odyssey facility on Ward's Island. Outside, in a dining room, 40 or 50 staff members wait. One at a time they enter the room, and for a half hour or more they are interrogated about their failings, asked to pledge their loyalty and light candles to Dr. Densen-Gerber.

She accuses a former patient of being crazy and sick. He sits with his head bent and says, “I don't deserve to have a candle.” He cries, tells her he loves her and will be dedicated. He lights a candle, but she slaps him in the face and blows the candle out.

The Beginnings

Judianne Densen-Gerber was born in 1934 in New York City, the daughter of lawyers who were divorced twenty years later. While her mother's Densen paper-box fortune paid for private schools and camps, servants, riding lessons, and speech teachers, money could

“...Dr. Densen-Gerber used patients as personal servants: She has had an Odyssey House chauffeur, chef, and baby-sitter...”

not make up for feelings of inadequacy. These emotions stemmed, Dr. Densen-Gerber has written, from the strong-willed nature of her parents, particularly her overpowering mother. Dr. Densen-Gerber's parents usually convinced their daughter that she was wrong, and, she says, she has had “a great need for outside approval.” Perhaps to compensate, she has become an overpowering woman herself, and today she claims Queen Elizabeth I as a role model for her understanding of power. “Her ability to say ‘I want this and that is what I’m going to have’ inspires me,” she has written. Indeed, she told one reporter that soon after she received her M.D. from New York University she quit her psychiatric residency at Bellevue Hospital because she was refused a Christmas Day off to spend with her children. She continued the residency at Metropolitan Hospital but did not fulfill the requirements that would have made her eligible for certification by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology.

All this occurred after Dr. Densen-Gerber had received her first professional degree, from Columbia University Law School. While there, she married Michael Baden, now deputy chief medical examiner of New York City. Baden had been chief medical examiner but was demoted by Mayor Koch last summer in a controversial decision.

The couple live with their four children in a five-story East End Avenue townhouse with a rooftop greenhouse, a building she says was once owned by John Barrymore. There is a country estate too, this located on several acres in the expensive Green Farms section of Westport. It has a view of Long Island Sound and an outdoor swimming pool, as well as a lavish Roman bath.

Certainly, Dr. Densen-Gerber enjoys living opulently. She covers an ample frame with costly dresses and caftans (a favorite designer is Hanae Mori); enjoys home visits from a hairdresser, facialist, and masseuse; and dines often at one or another of the city's most fashionable restaurants.

All this is a far cry from the shabby beginnings of her Odyssey House empire, an empire which she began and which has grown to mirror the opinions, emotions, and judgments of its founder. It started in a \$17-a-month building on East 109th Street with seventeen addicts who had been pa-

tients at Metropolitan Hospital. Dr. Densen-Gerber had organized them into a drug-free therapeutic community against the wishes of hospital authorities, and in 1966 they set up communal housekeeping in East Harlem.

The first hint of the strange way Odyssey House was to develop came in 1967, when Dr. Densen-Gerber sought to assert control over the program, which had been managed by the addicts while she was in her residency. Tony Enriquez, the group's leader, had visited other treatment programs that promoted addicts' self-reliance. He began to worry that Dr. Densen-Gerber, after coming on the scene full-time, was sacrificing the addicts' needs to her own desire for authority. This took curious forms. “She insisted all the residents come in without their shoes,” Enriquez said. “She would lie on a chaise longue and have everyone sit around at her feet.”

Nancy Hoving, then a member of the Odyssey advisory council, had the same reaction. “I remember her grandly lying back and being *grande dame* to all the peons who were lying around,” said Mrs. Hoving, the wife of the former director of the Metropolitan Museum. “It wasn't like anything I've ever seen before or since in a therapeutic community.”

Dr. Densen-Gerber called a board meeting to deal with the opposition being mounted by Enriquez. He was ordered to leave, but the rest of the addicts followed in solidarity. Several board members, including Rabbi Ronald Sobel of Temple Emanu El and Professor Henry J. Foster of New York University Law School, also quit.

The addicts scattered. Some went to other programs, others to the street, but Odyssey House continued. A few of the original residents eventually returned, and new ones arrived, mostly through court referrals. And Dr. Densen-Gerber started to collect important supporters. The most important one was Nelson Rockefeller.

Nancy Hoving thought that Dr. Densen-Gerber fascinated the governor. “She had picketed Rockefeller's house [to demand funding]. She took a batch of kids and did one of those emotional camping-outs in front of his apartment.”

Within a year, Nelson Rockefeller was taking Judi along to meetings that might have anything to do with drugs or kids. “He was kind of amused by her,” Mrs. Hoving added. She “kept

him laughing. He was intrigued by her. I think he liked her spunk.”

Rockefeller's support was critical at Odyssey's beginnings, especially since methadone maintenance programs for heroin addicts were competing for favor. Graham Finney, city Addiction Services commissioner in the early seventies, said, “I never did figure that one out, but [the connection] was continuing and effective . . . sufficient to give her an inside track and a less critical reception [at the state drug agency] than many of the other programs that were being launched at the same time.

“Political connections were constantly used and, frankly, became an annoyance, although one had very much to admire her capabilities as an entrepreneur,” Finney said. “They were accompanied by very considerable pressure on a local agency from the Rockefeller administration.”

An Inside Job

To outsiders, Odyssey House was like the dozens of other therapeutic communities. Addicts attended group therapy, went to encounter sessions, and received remedial education. Odyssey had a reputation for having a more intensive psychiatric overlay than most programs and for accepting patients who were more psychologically damaged.

The program expanded from New York to New Orleans, Shreveport, Detroit, Flint, Salt Lake City, Hampton and Dover, New Hampshire. Last year, according to an Odyssey official, there were 350 residents in the program. The operating budget was \$3-million, over half of it raised from federal grants and a third from state- and local-government funds.

As the program grew, Dr. Densen-Gerber traveled around the country, visiting Odyssey facilities, testifying before legislatures, giving interviews, and raising public consciousness about drugs and abused children. Congresswoman Lindy Boggs of New Orleans said, “I think she had a great deal to do with the legislation we passed against sexual exploitation of children. She came down and had some meetings, distributed literature, showed some films, and pointed out the extent of the problem.”

But beyond the view of the press, the public, and even her benefactors, the goings-on at Odyssey House seemed to reflect Dr. Densen-Gerber's psycho-



Controversial healer: Dr. Judianne Densen-Gerber, Odyssey House's creator, in her Ward's Island office.

“...Male staff members at Odyssey House were made to enter a ‘beauty contest,’ parading on a stage in their bathing suits...”

logical needs more than those of the addicts she was committed to serve.

Part of the situation is related by her brother-in-law, Robert Baden, in a memorandum he wrote for her. She had asked him to impersonate an addict last winter and seek admission to one of Odyssey's three local facilities, at 309 East 6th Street.

Baden's confidential report is disquieting. He wrote that the East 6th Street house was in a state of disorganization, and told of an insensitive staff; dirty, inadequate facilities; abuses by senior residents; and threats that led to addicts' feelings of apathy, fear, and paranoia.

The physical conditions were unappetizing. He had been given a soiled bed sheet—it looked “as if someone stepped on it with dirty shoes . . . [it] had dried stiff semen spots on it.”

Sometimes it appeared as if power were exercised for its own sake, as when residents were rounded up for a meeting. Baden wrote: “We were all sent down to the living room to practice coming quickly when called.”

At the end, Baden jotted down his conclusions: “Emphasis in house is what one cannot do; not what one can. . . . Passiveness seems the rule, so no one rocks the boat. . . . The rules are enforced which are convenient for the enforcer. This creates a ‘jailhouse’ atmosphere—fear and paranoia. Passivity then becomes the way to service, so the potential leaders either become passive or leave.”

Unlike Baden, who saw the program from the inside, state evaluators have been only mildly critical. A 1978 report, the latest available from the Division of Substance Abuse Services (SAS), labeled Odyssey's operations “acceptable.” Nevertheless, the report noted that counselors were not used effectively, staff did not clearly understand the treatment plan, progress reports were written by patients, and there was no formal follow-up.

Today, SAS says those first three problems have been corrected while the fourth remains. And SAS director Julio Martinez said in an interview that Odyssey was “one of the better programs in the country.”

However, when federal investigators arrived at some harsher conclusions about one Odyssey program, Dr. Densen-Gerber withdrew a pending re-funding application, and no report was ever released.

This story begins at a press confer-

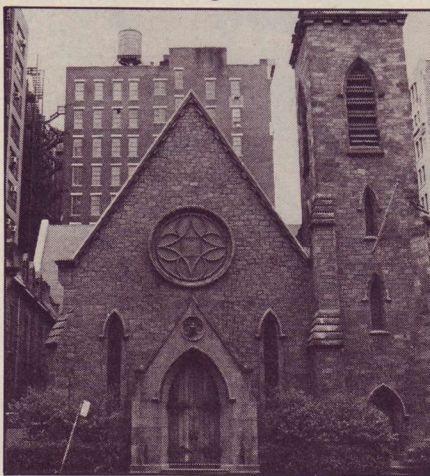
ence called last January to announce the opening of a first-of-its-kind Odyssey program for teenage prostitutes. Two fifteen-year-olds appeared before reporters to reveal the tawdry, chilling details of how they had sold their bodies and been abused by their pimps. There was no press conference eight months later when federal funding for Odyssey's Midtown Adolescent Resource Center (MARC) was stopped amid reports that those young prostitutes had been forced to trade one form of abuse for another.

The first MARC director quit after a month in the job, because, he says, he objected to Dr. Densen-Gerber's use of the young clients on national television. He called it exploitive and harmful. His successor lasted six weeks and was fired after she talked to federal investigators.

Yet criticisms made by these first two MARC chiefs were backed up by an independent contractor, a government project officer, and a team of federal- and private-agency officials.

The contractor charged that the prostitutes, who were housed in the same facilities as drug addicts, were forced to undergo strip searches by other Odyssey House inmates and were counted on the books as drug addicts to boost state reimbursements.

Jane Berdie, of Urban and Rural Systems Associates in San Francisco, wrote in her report that the girls had to strip completely and spread their buttocks each time they entered and left the East 6th Street building. MARC treatment practices—which were standard at Odyssey House—included confiscation of personal property and use of punishment signs. Staff members



Latest home: Odyssey's new facility, the Church of the Holy Communion.

told her it was a “destructive invasion of personal privacy in clients for whom this is an especially critical issue.”

One member of the federal team reported a “punitive and coercive orientation,” where “rewards were commensurate with compliance not necessarily change or maturation.” He wrote that the “sense of superficial concern” and the “misuse” of the children revealed philosophy and operations “characteristic of the Odyssey enterprises.”

He wrote, “It was therefore not particularly shocking to hear Densen-Gerber state that there are times when as in war children must be sacrificed for other long range ends.” This evaluator added that some Odyssey practices might have constituted child abuse.

A member of the city's police run-away unit said he stopped taking young prostitutes to Odyssey. “I'm afraid I would have only negative things to say” about MARC, said Detective Warren McGinniss of the Youth Aid Division. “Every kid we put in there walked right back out.”

MARC initially received a \$90,000 annual federal grant that normally would have been renewed for three and a half years. This grant was made despite the fact that the original program proposal had been disapproved by three reviewers. Nevertheless, the head of HEW's children's division had insisted that it be funded.

That decision was made by Dr. Blandina Cardenas Ramirez, until recently commissioner of the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families. “It was the only program that was specifically dealing with this issue,” she said in a phone interview. However, the grant guidelines did not refer to adolescent prostitution, a fact which would seem to make the Odyssey program ineligible. Dr. Ramirez pointed out that the guidelines also provide for “the discretion of the commissioner.” But the agency does not normally fund programs disapproved by its reviewers.

The government never published the critical findings of the re-funding review team. In a June 19 memo, Dr. Ramirez told why. “I also indicated to Dr. Densen-Gerber that should she withdraw the re-funding application there would, of course, be no need for a final composite report of the June 13, 14, 1979 site team visit to Odyssey House, thus it would not be written.”

“I didn't see the need for any further work on it,” said Dr. Ramirez, who speaks warmly of Dr. Densen-Gerber

and was the featured speaker at an Odyssey Media Awards luncheon last winter. Dr. Densen-Gerber withdrew the funding request, possibly to avoid a domino-effect federal investigation which could jeopardize Odyssey's \$1.8-million in federal funds.

Indeed, since the MARC program was housed in a regular drug-addict facility, the investigators had seen and were told about the treatment of addicts as well. On one visit in April, Berdie wrote, she saw a patient—who had been in the program for about two years—forced to sit for 40 hours on a metal folding chair in the hallway. She was in the "re-entry phase," and had actually gone out to school. But this patient had broken a "cardinal rule." She had held hands with a young man.

All sexual conduct, including hand holding, is regulated by Dr. Densen-Gerber. "All over the country, if you want to have a sexual relationship, you have to get her permission," said Jane Henkel, a former MARC director.

She called it part of the process of total control that aims to "wipe you out, completely alter your self-image and self-esteem, so they can rebuild you in their mold."

Some of the "wiping out" is done through humiliation. Residents who committed infractions were forced to wear costumes with paper ears and tails. "If you act like a jackass, you might as well look like a jackass," they were told.

Similar tales of abuse have emanated from Odyssey's Mabon program on Ward's Island, a project to help addicted mothers and their children.

Susan Kupferberg, of the city's Special Services for Children bureau, found conditions there "degrading," and was appalled at the use of "awareness signs" and other punishments. "They were forced to scrub floors and walls with toothbrushes as a sign of humility," she said. "The facility itself is run-down, disgusting."

The Mabon project sometimes has included non-addicted mothers who are in need of temporary shelter. In at least three cases, when such women sought to leave the program, Odyssey officials reportedly attempted to restrain them by refusing to allow them to take their children. In one instance, Mobilization for Youth secured a writ of habeas corpus for release of a one- and a three-year-old child and later filed a \$100,000 damage suit against Odyssey for "false imprisonment." The case is still pending.

In this atmosphere, it has been difficult to retain patients, and Odyssey has had a census problem. State reimbursement for the program is pegged to the number of patients in care, and one

staffer was reportedly told to "fudge the figures," to prevent a loss of state aid. Laurie Wolf, who began work at Odyssey in 1976, says: "I was told to pad it. I would add five to ten [patients] a week." Odyssey counsel Stephen Hutchinson called that "an outright lie."

Ceremonial Duties

Through the years, Dr. Densen-Gerber has demanded an extraordinary measure of personal support and loyalty from those around her. This has even extended to using addicts enrolled in Odyssey programs as personal servants. According to Dr. Charles Rohrs, Odyssey House's medical director from 1970 to 1975, and Elaine Schaefer, Dr. Densen-Gerber's executive secretary in 1976, the Odyssey chief had patients and staff clean her Manhattan and Connecticut homes, answer her phones, handle her personal accounts, run errands, and act as her chauffeur.

One man with a chef's background was put to work in her kitchen. "He stayed there six or seven months, then split," said Dr. Rohrs, now a professor at NYU medical school. "She sacrificed his opportunity for treatment to take care of her own needs."

"A therapeutic community is a kibbutz," contends Dr. Densen-Gerber. "In a kibbutz, we all share together. There were times that I've cooked for the patients. There are times the patients have watched my children."

However, Monsignor William O'Brien, president of the Therapeutic Communities of America, an association of 110 major programs, disagreed with Dr. Densen-Gerber's rationale. He said, "If I am a patient and the director asks me to be his chauffeur or even to bring him his lunch on a tray, I stop doing things for myself, because now I'm a favored client. I have a friend in the right place who's going to



New causes: Dr. Densen-Gerber is now a leading spokeswoman on child abuse.

take care of me. As a result, I stop growing."

When staff members complained about the personal chores, they often became targets of Dr. Densen-Gerber's abuse. In an instance three years ago, a consultant reproached Dr. Densen-Gerber for "borrowing" a child-care worker from the Mabon program for her own use. "You have the money. You should pay your own baby-sitters," she said.

Dr. Densen-Gerber was reportedly furious and called a meeting about staff loyalty. "She came wearing what looked like a screw through her head [like a Steve Martin joke]," recalled Schaefer. "She said she gave her life to Odyssey and nobody cared. To show their love for one another, she washed [Odyssey Institute executive vice-president] Fred Cohen's feet and he washed hers."

The next week the staff was summoned to the previously noted candle-lighting event. "When it was my turn, I went in and saw her sitting behind a desk with the candles," recalled Schaefer. "She started to scream, 'I can't stand this woman! Get her out of here! I can't stand you! You try to control my life!'"

"I started to laugh," Schaefer added. "They assumed I was crying. 'I don't want to stay here,' I said. Then the group began to talk to me, and it quieted down. I said, 'Yes, I will try to work harder.' I lit a candle."

Dr. Densen-Gerber had an explanation for it all. "The commitment of lighting candles is an old religious commitment done in our churches," she said. As for the washing of feet, "I would think so did Christ. I think it is tremendously important to follow the role model of Christ. The washing of feet is a statement of humility."

In another instance, a year ago, staffers went through four days of psychodrama and confrontation that left all of them exhausted and some angry and humiliated.

"They did a parody on the election of the pope," said Laurie Wolf. "They had some of the men say why they wanted to be pope. Some made inferences about women and sex. Then they made a cross out of plywood and carried Fred Cohen, dressed in a furry bikini, to the Stations of the Cross. Judi started chanting, 'Crucify him, crucify him.' That was the point at which a lot of people walked out."

Later that August 1978 day, male staff members were forced to put on bathing suits and parade on a stage. "She felt the males should know what females are subjected to in a beauty contest," Wolf said.

At the marathon a day later, some 75 staff members, including residents, were interrogated one at a time and

“...At the same time Dr. Densen-Gerber was spending \$552 for a dinner meeting, Odyssey patients were sent begging for food...”

were asked to pledge their loyalty to Dr. Densen-Gerber and to Odyssey House. “If you passed, you went to one side of the room and joined the team. If you failed, you could try again, or you would be fired.” Each examination lasted for 30 to 45 minutes; the marathon went on from noon, August 23, to the morning of the twenty-fifth. Wolf failed the test and resigned.

With such employee practices, Odyssey has found it difficult to keep staff. A state performance review done two years ago showed the turnover rate for five months to be 75 percent for executives, 71 percent for treatment workers, and 100 percent for support staff. There are now 43 people on the payroll in New York.

An ex-staff member sought to make some sense out of the elements of authoritarianism that existed in the programs. He wrote a friend that his analysis of the Odyssey structure had shown him striking similarities to Orwell’s 1984:

“Mind control,” said the ex-staffer, “is necessary for the good of the social order, it is accomplished by degradation and humiliation for not conforming to the rules or the power structure’s authority. This is most clearly the case when it comes to matters of intimacy and sex. Freedom is antisocial in this context.”

He said the rules called for “no sex with anyone, unless the person has been approved by the high authorities, and then only when permission is granted as to when and for how long the relationship may be maintained.

“Everything is reinforced by an elite group (hand picked by Densen-Gerber) who are very bright and very conforming, and who are rewarded by the granting of sexual privileges.”

He opined that Dr. Densen-Gerber is successful “because no one wants to deal with the people she takes into this structure: the junkies (mostly Black and Hispanic), and now, the child prostitutes, incest victims, women ex-offenders, and, I am sure, more to come. In fact, I am sure that the politicians support Judianne precisely because she can hide these people from the public.”

“All this,” he said, “is called ‘cure’.”

Odyssey’s Oracle?

Outside New York, local officials have generally labeled the program a success. However, the man who ran Odyssey treatment centers in Michigan,

Utah, and New Mexico for more than four years had a different point of view. Robert Ensworth said he left Odyssey because “Dr. Densen-Gerber became an oracle.”

He said she had been deified, placed on a pedestal, and made immune to advice or reproach. He called that “destructive to the group process, which is the basic mode of treatment. Young revolutionaries become old dictators.”

Ex-MARC director Henkel also saw a cult quality to Dr. Densen-Gerber. “She is surrounded by ex-Odyssey people [who work as staff]. They were saved. Everybody else can be saved, and she’s the savior.”

Dr. Rohrs agreed that “many people truly believe she saved their lives, and she won’t let them forget it.”

Some former employees saw a sexual component to Dr. Densen-Gerber’s behavior. “When she was working at home, she would call male staff upstairs, and she’d be in a nightgown,” said one. Often she conducted the “president’s meeting” with her top staff members at her home while wearing what one participant called “bed clothes.”

That practice fits in with others reminiscent of the sort of gestures that royalty employs toward subjects. Henkel describes a room at the 18th Street Odyssey building where Dr. Densen-Gerber used to “hold court.” “It was fitted with memorabilia—childhood pictures, plaques, and awards. She would lie on a pink chaise and greet people, extending her hand as if she were a queen,” Henkel said. During



Hooked on kids: Odyssey operates a major program for addicted mothers.

staff meetings, she would often have a butler bring her a food tray. Others would wait while she ate.

Through it all, despite the criticism, Judianne Densen-Gerber has few illusions about her reputation and willingly confirms much of what people say about her.

“Am I considerate of the feelings of others? No,” she says. “I am not a people person. Maybe that’s one of the difficulties. I’m in the people business, but I’m not a people person.”

“I’m feisty, abrasive, difficult, demanding, perfectionist, short-tempered,” she says. “I don’t need to be liked. . . . I wouldn’t say I like people. . . . I have very little pity, very little compassion, very little sympathy. . . . I think compassion is destructive.”

Her motto, on a plaque in her office, is “I don’t get angry. I get even.” She once wrote in a memo to her executive staff, “Nice guys/gals finish last!”

“I am extremely hierarchical and authoritarian,” she says. “I don’t play by the same rules that other people play by.”

Rules of the Game

Some of the rules Dr. Densen-Gerber employed are certainly different. And they led to reported practices which are at the least questionable and are currently under official scrutiny: false claims for services, commingling of funds, improperly kept expense accounts, and other fiscal legerdemain.

Dr. Densen-Gerber first came under fire during the Lindsay administration for allegedly charging the city for services she didn’t perform. Nicholas Scopetta, then commissioner of investigation, said his staff found that while there were “some failings of record keeping,” “no actionable misconduct” existed. He also said, “There were allegations of double billing that were not borne out by the investigation.” However, her own staff in later years repeated the charges and said the city had investigated only her reimbursement claims in New York City without comparing them with services billed to programs elsewhere.

Attorney General Robert Abrams is now looking into that allegation and others, many of them lodged by former Odyssey comptroller John Malik. Malik was a Touche Ross consultant assigned to do the program’s books when he was hired by Odyssey in 1973. He left angrily in 1975—with a sheaf

of records that backed up his charges of financial abuse.

Malik and other staffers say Densen-Gerber is ripping off the drug programs to finance an extravagant life-style she could not otherwise afford. In addition to her \$107,000-a-year salary, Odyssey Institute—a nonprofit foundation set up in 1975—pays \$30,000 for her fringe benefits and annuity, more than \$21,000 on a life-insurance policy, about \$9,000 for travel and entertainment, some \$4,000 for dues and licenses, and \$9,000 for auto rental and expenses. The total in a fiscal-year-1979 budget projection comes to about \$180,000, most of it financed by the government-supported Odyssey treatment programs, which pay her as a consultant.

Malik supplied a list of New York Odyssey House checks drawn on Citibank for "Account 13," which Dr. Densen-Gerber controlled. Between June 1973 and August 1975, there were more than \$50,000 in expenses. They included \$15,118 to Doubleday, Lippincott, and Penguin to buy copies of her books that did not sell; \$226 to Marquis *Who's Who* and the other biographical-sketch books; \$150 for repair of antique chairs; \$2,395 for parking tickets; and \$44.80 to a beauty salon to pay for a facialist sent to Happy Rockefeller.

Odyssey attorney Stephen Hutchinson said the books were for education and fund raising, the antique chairs were used in the boardroom, the parking tickets were not acquired by Dr. Densen-Gerber, and in view of Governor Rockefeller's support, the facialist for his wife "would not be an abuse of discretion."

People who worked in the Odyssey programs complained that while Dr. Densen-Gerber was spending \$552 for a pre-board-meeting dinner at La Bibliotheque, patients were begging for food. Dr. Rohrs said that once or twice a year, when money ran short, residents went to local markets to ask for donations. Money raised privately by Odyssey Institute did not go to treatment programs. Indeed, the \$60,000 netted at the Rockefeller fund raiser, says Malik, was earmarked for Account 13.

The issue of salary and perks has been raised at board meetings, acknowledged Matthew Kornreich, the insurance-company president who is Odyssey Institute's chairman. He suggested that corporate officials see expense accounts differently from social workers. "There isn't a company, including my own, who is going to object to a person taking first class," he said.

In any event, her perquisites were not enough. Several ex-staffers criticized her practice of accepting wealthy Odyssey residents for paid private therapy.



Royal gestures: During meetings, Dr. Densen-Gerber has had her food brought to her on a tray, while others have gone without eating.

"If she knew that a patient's family had money, she would try to solicit them as her patients," said Elaine Schaefer.

Sometimes even poor clients paid Densen-Gerber for therapy when they received money for doing staff work. After their final phase of treatment, they were expected to work for at least six months to repay the cost of the treatment. They were placed in slots funded by government grants, but kept only \$70 a month of their earnings, returning the rest to Odyssey minus money paid to Dr. Densen-Gerber for therapy.

These government-funded positions were called "turn-back lines," said Malik, who pointed to an Odyssey document listing \$38,250 in turn-backs from five residents.

Hutchinson said turn-back lines no longer exist. "Any person who might be in therapy with Dr. Densen-Gerber, that's a private arrangement that has nothing to do with their employment," he said.

When Odyssey had other money problems, administrators neglected to pay on a timely basis payroll taxes that as of January 1978 amounted to \$97,000. Officials also say that, at the same time, Odyssey owed the city \$119,000 plus an additional \$94,000 which the state had disallowed and deducted from its own drug-program payments to the city. It told New York City to collect from Odyssey. Dr. Densen-Gerber responded with a customary mixture of defensiveness and chutzpah:

"Her cry was the only way she could raise cash was to send kids around with *pushkes* to raise money in the streets. She said, You don't want us to

do that, do you?" said Deputy Comptroller Martin Ives. His boss, Comptroller Harrison Goldin, leaned on her to pay up. She responded with a Mailgram in February 1978 urging him to "save the defenseless newborn junkies for whom there is no other safe harbor."

She also wrote to Mayor Koch. "Dear Ed," she started, "I have just returned from a triumphant visit to England in which Parliament voted unanimously to move its child pornography bill." She told him, "It is obvious from your letter that you are being told lies. I can only assume that there are hidden political agendas coming from factions that wish to silence me on my positions on child pornography and prostitution, and also those who have made a bid on one of our buildings wishing to force us to lower the price."

She appealed to him, because, she said, "[I have] never known you to be politically on the side of organized crime."

Koch wrote her not to expect preferential treatment, saying her claims were "outrageous." He said if she had evidence of illegal activity, she should bring it to the attention of law-enforcement agencies.

Meanwhile, an audit review received by the city in June 1978 reported that Dr. Densen-Gerber had been hired as a consulting psychiatrist for the Odyssey Institute programs, but was charging the city for other services. It also noted large bills for undocumented long-distance phone calls. When an auditor questioned her time sheets, she wrote that he was displaying "an inability of men in the system to accept a

“...Odyssey has been able to count among its board members Alex Haley, Eleanor McGovern, and Citicorp’s William Spencer...”

woman as Chief Executive Officer.”

Alan Tishman, the real-estate magnate and a former member of Odyssey’s board, told her he did not think all the moneys owed should come out of Odyssey funds. “If the state will not permit your salary for these years, why hurt Odyssey House?” he asked her. “Perhaps you should help repay.”

While Odyssey House has straightened out those financial problems, it is faced with a new, damaging audit covering the time from April 1976 through March 1977 released by the comptroller’s office earlier this month. It questions 87 percent of Odyssey expenses charged to the city’s home-relief program, about \$42,000.

The audit said invoices, canceled checks, and time sheets were missing from files and that money was spent for improper purposes, including \$2,000 to store several thousand reprints of oil paintings. The \$2,000 had been returned to Odyssey as a donation. The comptroller also questioned some \$9,800 paid to Homeric Realty, whose board is composed of Dr. Densen-Gerber’s mother and two other Odyssey directors.

“I’m not a martyr,” Densen-Gerber said in an interview when asked about her financial practices. “There is a certain style of life which goes with being the president of a corporation that is doing multi-millions of dollars’ worth of business.”

Good Friends

In spite of the evidence of mismanagement, officials and bureaucrats had a difficult time going up against Dr. Densen-Gerber’s big guns. One former official said, “She can get 40 major figures to call you in one day, people with access to the governor and the mayor. The average person in government plays it cool. Why get in a fight if you can avoid it?”

When the state sought to collect on the nearly \$100,000 disallowed for 1969 through 1972, Alan Tishman wrote to then State Comptroller Arthur Levitt and said he was afraid a payback would put Odyssey out of business. He said he was writing on behalf of himself and Floyd Hall, chairman of the board of Eastern Airlines; Gustave Levy of Goldman Sachs & Company; Eleanor McGovern; William Spencer, president of Citicorp; and Richard Winston of Harry Winston, Inc.

She also made it a point to make

friends in the media, and the Odyssey Institute board included John McGoff, who owns more than 70 newspapers; publisher Rupert Murdoch; Alice Newhouse, wife of the Louisiana publisher; and author Alex Haley.

She has always known the value of political allies and spent money to cultivate them. Besides her special relationship with Rockefeller, she paid former Queens Congressman Seymour Halpern, at one time chairman of a Capitol Hill drug task force, handsome fees—\$16,575 in one year—to do public relations.

And she spoke their language. “When Judi came to talk about a grant, she talked in terms of congressional districts she had drug-treatment programs in,” a former Odyssey official said.

She let government bureaucrats know about her connections. Robert DuPont, former director of the National Institute of Drug Abuse, a funding agency, thought she had powerful relationships. “When Judi comes to the Capitol, I will always see her in a congressman’s or senator’s office. She’s having lunch with somebody or dinner with somebody or over at the McGovern’s house.” Eleanor McGovern was a vice-president of Odyssey Institute.

Dr. Densen-Gerber could also count on powerful friends in the business community. There was Citicorp’s Spencer, a key member of the Odyssey Institute board, and AT&T president William Ellinghaus, along with Kornreich and Tishman.

Many board members said they believed in Densen-Gerber’s commitment and her achievements. “I think she has probably uncovered more chapter and verse, particularly in the treatment of children, than anybody has ever done,” said Spencer. Tishman called her “dedicated” and “a genius.” Kornreich said she led and inspired people. “I used to think of her as a Father Flanagan,” he said.

And she could be a great charmer. “We’ve had lunch together at ‘21,’ and she talks to everybody—the waiter, the captain,” said Tishman’s wife, Peggy. “She’s just a very open, warm, funny kind of person, one of those people who, when you’re with them, it’s like being at a party.”

However, the charm appears to have worn off for some of her supporters. Last month, the board of the New York Council on Alcoholism, which had become affiliated with Odyssey Institute last year, resigned from Odyssey in a

body. Joel Bennett, the council’s chairman, also resigned as chairman of the New York Odyssey House board.

He told Dr. Densen-Gerber in a letter that association with Odyssey had subjected the council to “rebuffs from previous donors, friends, and in some cases, government funding groups.”

Indeed, Dr. Densen-Gerber has sometimes exaggerated her connections. On an application for federal funding, she listed herself as an adviser to New Jersey’s Democratic Senator Harrison Williams. Williams’s press secretary said she had been consulted on drug issues but was not the senator’s paid adviser. William Salomon, the investment banker, and Janet Levy, the late Gustave’s wife, were equally surprised to find themselves on the Odyssey board of governors, a listing used for fund raising and promotional purposes. Salomon said he didn’t know the program and had contributed money at Spencer’s request. “They solicit each other; you know how it is,” Salomon’s secretary explained. And Mrs. Levy said she had met Dr. Densen-Gerber at a dinner honoring her husband and had simply continued to give money.

Dr. Densen-Gerber’s chief backers believe that her main fault is no more than an excessive, volatile style and an egotistical personality. “Sometimes, if you can do things diplomatically, the way we as business people do, Judi will take an opposite tack,” said Kornreich.

This combativeness is seen by some as a means to achieve worthwhile goals. “A lot of her stuff is an ego trip,” said Tishman, “but it’s her ego that enables her to accomplish so much by just busting her way in.”

Even Mayor Koch, who called his relationship with her “stormy,” said she is “one of those seminal forces, original, a go-getter. There are very few people who can claim as many accomplishments.”

The harshest criticism of Dr. Densen-Gerber is given off the record. Professionals who deal with drug addicts and abused children, and former Odyssey staff members, generally say they hope that someone else will “blow the whistle” on what they consider dangerous and irrational practices, but most of them refuse to be quoted. Such an attack would “not be professional,” they say. Or, “She is too powerful. She can make trouble for people who attack her.” The trouble is, the people in her programs can’t make trouble for anyone. ■