

# Psychics, skeptics strive for harmonic convergence

By ROCHELLE D. LEWIS  
Times Staff Writer

Dr. Gary Posner has been carrying a \$1,000 check in his wallet for the last two months, just waiting to give it away.

It could be yours — if you can pass the test. The test is part of a war that has been quietly brewing in the Tampa Bay area between believers in the paranormal and those leery about such claims.

The Tampa Bay Skeptics are the main antagonists and anyone with claims of soothsaying, faith healing, crystals, unidentified flying objects, astrology or any other "fringe science" is fair game.

"We're concerned for people who are being misled," said Posner, who founded the skeptics' group a year ago. "We're concerned about the widespread belief in things like astrology and ESP and UFOs . . . and all those sorts of things because there is no evidence that those things exist. Yet it is a multibillion-dollar industry taking advantage of people who don't know that these things have never been shown to be real."

But some psychics aren't deterred. "I think Dr. Posner is very psychic himself and he's fighting it," Largo psychic Barbara Jett sensed. "He's either afraid of it, or someone has told him that this is evil or wrong."

The Skeptics, who celebrate their one-year anniversary next month, have 123 members and publish a quarterly newsletter called *Tampa Bay Skeptics REPORT*, which has become an educational source.

They have been courting Lutz astrologer Janet Sciales and Jett, who made psychic readings in February at the Safety Harbor Museum. Both have agreed to tests, but such a harmonic convergence has yet to occur.

Sciales, who had a radio talk show on Tampa's WTKN, was first approached by Tampa Bay Skeptics in October when she spoke at one of the group's quarterly meetings. She later paid the \$10 annual dues to join the Skeptics.

Sciales claims astrology is a science and that the energy responsible for the astrological effects is reflected in sunlight.

"She's concocted this because this is the only way that she can be scientific about astrology," Posner contends. "To me that is so wild and until it can be demonstrated as true, I can't see why anybody would believe it."

Posner's test would involve matching astrological charts with birthdates and personality test results. But Sciales thinks that type of test is unfair. She also criticized her fellow Skeptics because they would not agree to say astrology was valid if she passed a test, even though they wanted her to publicly reject astrology if she lost.

"My goal, of course, is to prove the validity of astrology," Sciales said. "I'm not going to put my reputation on the line if they're not going to do the same thing. Why should I?"

Posner has been pursuing Jett since he saw her at the Safety Harbor Museum. There, the clairvoyant Jett felt the vibrations of artifacts and supposedly reconstructed pieces of history.

Jett was offended when Posner brought her something wrapped in a handkerchief during her demonstration and asked her to identify it.

"It's a spiritual belief with me," Jett said. "I don't think Gary Posner would call up a priest and have him stand on his head to prove that he's Catholic. What he's asking me to do is something that I can't do."

Jett practices psychometry, where a person divines facts about objects or their owners from the object. "There's really a picture," she said. "It's like seeing a television screen inside my head. I actually see people. I see things."

Posner admitted that a skill like that probably is hard to test scientifically. But he believes he eventually will find a way.

That's where the \$1,000 check comes in. Posner vows to give it to anyone who can demonstrate paranormal ability in a scientific test, arranged by Posner and the test-taker, that would rule out cheating.

The 39-year-old St. Petersburg internist was not always so quick to judge. Until his late 20s, he believed UFOs existed.

Then he started reading the works of well-known UFO debunker Philip Klass. Through the years Posner has become friends with Klass and with famed psychic investigator and magician James Randi, who were involved in starting a national group called the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

Posner claims in published works to have disproven or helped to disprove claims including a cancer cure from a renowned sacred spring in Lourdes, France, a miracle involving a young Tampa girl whose alleged brain tumor supposedly was cured

by a faith healer, and a case in which a Christian doctor claimed a woman had an "immaculate abortion."

Dr. Paul Kurtz, the Buffalo philosophy professor who is chairman of CSICOP, said Posner is well recognized as a good researcher, "very careful in examining claims."

CSICOP, founded in 1976, is a national skeptic organization that boasts a bevy of well-known writers and scientists including astronomer Carl Sagan, biochemist and science writer Isaac Asimov and Stephen Jay Gould, a paleontologist and university professor. In 1981 grassroots groups began to form and now there are about 65 worldwide, Kurtz said.

But psychics and paranormal professionals also have their national advocacy groups.

"We'd still be back in the dark ages if it wasn't for the visionaries," said Gordon Hoener, president of the Psychic Science Institute near St. Louis. "If the people who have visions and dreams are stopped by the skeptics, everything comes to an end. Fortunately, most people ignore it and go on."

But Posner and his fellow skeptics have a sense of mission.

"Of course we think our goal in life is to counteract some of the kooks out there," said 42-year-old St. Petersburg lawyer, Terry Smiljanich. "It's simply an attempt to impose some rationality in the world."

Temple Terrace psychologist Miles Hardy, who is vice president of the group, describes the skeptics as "a little island of people" who do not make fun of believers, but just want to make sure that people do not miss out on all of the facts.

"We just feel it's an obligation to tell people that there are wonderful things that are true and atrocious things that are false," he said. "Someone has to be the watchdog."



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SATURDAY, MAY 13, 1989

## Skeptics founder reissues challenge

Editor: Re: May 7 article, "Psychics, skeptics strive for harmonic convergence."

Janet Sciales' excuse for not honoring her prior agreement to be tested by the Tampa Bay Skeptics is a lame one. As Janet is fully aware, Tampa Bay Skeptics will not sanction a test until all parties agree, in writing, that the conditions are fair, that failure to succeed would be evidence of the absence of the power in question (astrology in her case), and that success would be evidence in favor of the power, earning our \$1,000 prize, which we would then immediately award at a press conference.

She also is aware of our commitment to publicize any successful performance in our own newsletter, as well as in any scientific journal that would accept the formal paper that we would prepare.

Despite this, Sciales has yet to engage in negotiations with us regarding the ground rules for such a test, electing instead to cancel her appointments with us.

We are also prepared to negotiate a test format to Barbara Jett's satisfaction. I do not know on what basis she has decided that "Dr. Posner is very psychic himself. . .," as she says in your article. But if she suspects that she is no more "psychic" than I am, this might explain her reluctance, thus far, to meet with us.

Gary P. Posner, M.D., Founder,  
Tampa Bay Skeptics