

Unmasking the fakes and the frauds

By WARREN EPSTEIN
Tribune Staff Writer

TAMPA — Dr. Gary Posner has a vision. He sees more than 400 people paying more than \$400 a pop at a Tampa Holiday Inn to hear a woman who claims to channel the spirit of a 35,000-year-old warrior. He sees a monthly psychic fair at a Tampa Ramada Hotel drawing hundreds of believers who pay \$20 to \$40 each for a psychic reading. He sees dozens of tarot readers, palm readers and astrologers throughout the Bay area making their livings by telling strangers about the future. The frightening thing — at least to Posner — is that his vision is reality.

It's no myth that the supernatural sometimes makes super profits.

Preaching for skepticism *St. Pete*

Posner, a 38-year-old Tampa internist, blames those profits on a dangerous rash of irrationality.

His prescription: a healthy dose of skepticism.

To that end, Posner recently founded the Tampa Bay Skeptics, a group of more than 80 unbelievers who hope to give publicity to "the other side" of the supernatural argument.



Posner

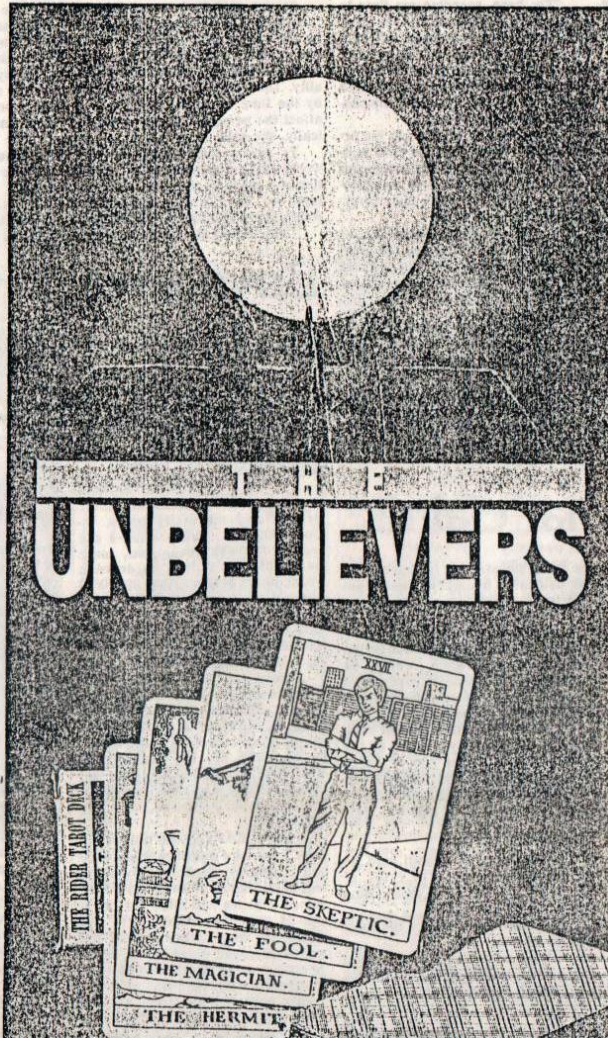
"Our concern is not people who want to toy around with astrology or ESP, but the people who may be misled into believing that there's some foundation for it being real, when so far science has been unable to find any evidence to support that," Posner said. "It may be fun, but it's not real."

If religious converts make the most fervent proselytizers, the same can be said of skeptics. Posner once believed in "all that stuff."

When he was a child, his grandparents and uncle said they saw a UFO.

Young Posner instantly was fascinated and became involved in a group of UFO believers.

It wasn't until after medical school that Posner converted to a skeptical philosophy. At the time, he was corresponding with the experts from both sides.



His eye is quicker than the hand

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PLANTATION — Randall Zwinge, 5, waited till his parents fell asleep, then sneaked downstairs.

He stayed awake all night with his weary eyes trained on the fireplace.

But, alas, no jolly fat man arrived. Another myth shot down.

Randall grew into a 39-year-old magician, his name changed to James ("The Amazing") Randi, and shooting down myths became his obsession.

Taking on the psychics

During Randi's 15 years as a debunker of phony mystics, his aim has been marksman-true. Those who don't believe it should look at some of the casualties.

In 1972, the alleged Israeli psychic Uri Geller convinced scientists at the Stanford Research Institute he could bend spoons, make watches run backward and change the direction of laser beams with the power of his mind.

Randi recreated all of those feats with misdirection, sleight-of-hand and stage-magic trickery.

Geller met his Waterloo on a disastrous "Tonight" show episode in which he failed to perform a single feat; Carson's staff, consulting with Randi, had set up safeguards against cheating.

Another Randi target was Peter Popoff, the TV evangelist who claimed to be inspired by God's voice to heal strangers in his audience. He would further impress strangers by reciting their names, addresses and diagnoses of their illnesses.

Randi used a staff of volunteers, a hidden video camera and a radio frequency scanner to discover that Popoff's wife — who worked the crowd before the show — had a radio transmitter in her oversize purse.

"Popoff says that God speaks directly to him because he's an anointed minister," Randi said afterward. "Three things amaze me about that. First of all, it turns out that God's frequency — I didn't know that he used radio — is 39.170 MHz, and that God is a woman, and sounds exactly



James Randi