

STUFF

AN 11-YEAR-OLD IS SUING THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

By Julian Morgans



Photo courtesy of iStockphoto/digitalskillet.

In 2006, Australia instituted mandatory background checks for those who work with children to ensure they're not baby touchers or prone to cooking little kids in cauldrons. But apparently, God thinks this law is wrong, at least according to the country's Jehovah's Witnesses, who have chosen to follow their savior's law in lieu of their government's and refuse to have their members screened. But an 11-year-old schoolboy from Traralgon, Victoria, has had enough. He recently filed a lawsuit against the Witnesses, declaring that this negligence is tantamount to child abuse. To learn more, I spoke with Steven Unthank, an ex-Witness who's launched a crusade against the sect's policies toward children and who helped the boy (who can't be named in the press under Australian law) file the suit.

VICE: What is the rationale behind the Jehovah's Witnesses refusing these background checks?

Steven Unthank: They believe that anyone high up in the church has been chosen by God, and it's unreasonable to make them conform to man's law. It's like questioning the will of God.

It's not every day that an 11-year-old sues an international religious organization. How did this boy's case come about?

When he was eight, he witnessed the rape of another child within the church. He then saw that neither the church nor the police did anything because the person who raped the girl remained in the church.

A minor was raped within the community, and no one did anything about it until this kid stepped up?

It was complicated because the rapist was also a minor, and their dad also happened to be involved in the church legal team. He worked in construction law, but anyway, he knew how to work the system.

Is the alleged rape part of his case?

No. I was chatting with the boy's family one day about the working-with-children laws, and we were discussing how it's been

very hard to force the church to comply. I said I would have to literally file the criminal charges myself and sue the church. The child then came into the room and said, "If you're going to take them to court, I want to do it, too."

So, to be clear, this little guy filed the suit of his own volition? You didn't encourage or otherwise push him into doing so?

No. In fact, when I said to the father, "It's going to cost us about \$70 to file the charges," the boy came in and asked whether the elders would obey the law [if ordered to by the court]. We said yes, and then he said, "Good, I'll pay for it, and I'll get some of my friends to pay for it." I said I'd be the prosecutor and keep his name out of everything, and that's what I'm doing.

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