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Tara was abused by the man she was taught to trust most – now she wants justice

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Tara was abused by an elder within the Jehovah's Witness organisation in 1990. She hopes the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse will bring her justice.



Vanessa Brown, news.com.au @vanessajbrown



TARA refuses to keep Milo in her house.

Because for her, the green tin resembles the night she lost her innocence; and a moment of horror that still keeps her awake at night 26 years on.

When Tara was just four years old, her parents made the decision to join the Jehovah's Witness organisation, which is currently at the centre of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The Jehovah's Witness organisation relied on outdated policies and practices, including a 2000-year-old two-witness rule, the royal commission found.

Tara's abuse is an example of no-one believing the then eight-year-old because she was the only witness to the ordeal.

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Tara was abused by an elder at a Jehovah's Witness organisation in Victoria. Source: *Supplied*

WHY TARA'S FAMILY JOINED THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES:

Tara, who is being represented by Shine Lawyers, said that her "hippie" parents decided to join the religion as a way of providing a better life for their young family.

"My parents had never been religious, but two nice looking men once came to our front door and made joining Jehovah's Witness sound like a great idea," Tara, who didn't want her surname identified, told news.com.au.

"They told my parents that when the world ends, those part of Jehovah's Witness will all live in paradise."

The religion claims it will "bless obedient people with perfect health and everlasting life in an earthly paradise" should they follow their rules.

Tara's childhood soon became consumed by the organisation, where she was required to study "almost every day" for Jehovah's Witness meetings, along with daily scriptures and prayers.

"We weren't allowed to watch television with violence or sex, and listening to different bands and singers wasn't really allowed," she said.

"You can watch the shows the elders say is OK, but this only insulates your entire life.

"As a child, we needed to study before every meeting, which happened three or so times a week.

"From when you wake up, you need to read daily scriptures and pray before every meal.

"Everything from how you wear your hair, to your clothing is all controlled. No piercings, hair dyes or beards. Basically anything too wild isn't allowed."



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Tara when she was a young girl living in Victoria. Source:Supplied

‘I WAS SO SCARED I WET THE BED’:

When Tara, now 34, was just eight years old she accepted an invitation to stay at a friend’s house who lived in a nearby town in Victoria.

Tara’s friend, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was the daughter of the Jehovah’s Witness elder (equivalent to a Priest) who she and her family would see for services several times a week.

“I was about seven when the family arrived to our town,” Tara said.

“He was the elder and headed up our church. He was the one we had to look up to, and was the man who could do no wrong.”

Arriving with his wife and two children, the town’s new Jehovah’s Witness elder — who cannot be named — often invited Tara over for sleep overs at his family home.

“I think he used his daughter as bait to have other children sleep over at their house,” Tara said.

“My parents weren’t sleep over people, but his family would ask me over all the time.”

It wasn't until 1990 that Tara was abused by both the elder and his young daughter, who was a few years older than Tara.

While at a sleepover at the elder's house, he made his daughter and Tara take their clothes off. Tara alleges that he touched her, and forced his daughter to touch her on the vagina as well.

"I remember how terrified I was," Tara said.

"I was so scared I wet the bed. She stripped naked and he showed me on her what he wanted to do.

"Before he came in to the bedroom, she got up and left the bedroom and went to the kitchen. She came back with a tin of Milo and two spoons, encouraging me to have some.

"Then her father came in through the bedroom door. I thought we were going to get in trouble for the Milo.

"To this day, Milo is not allowed in my house."



The Jehovah's Witness elder who Tara alleges abused her in 1990, is seen here baptising her older sister. Source:Supplied

Tara admitted this was the last time she ever returned to his house. After being threatened not to say a word, Tara said the pain and humiliation eventually reached a point of needing to speak out.

"I didn't tell my parents at first because I got threatened not to say anything," she said.

"They said my whole family would be ostracised if I said anything and an outcast from the religion. And for a little child to hear that is a huge threat.

"All I could think is that no one would talk to us, and no one would believe me."

'THAT NIGHT CHANGED ME FOREVER'

After five years, when she was 13 years old, Tara decided to speak about the abuse to her older brother and mother.

"Before the abuse, I was a happy, bubbly kid who wasn't overly shy," she recalled.

"But what happened completely changed me. I would have terrible nightmares and wet the bed. "My mum had to board up the windows, and let my dog sleep with me so I felt safe. I completely withdrew.

"Even now, I still need my dog on my bed, and cry in the middle of the night from nightmares."

Tara's mum arranged counselling but was forced to have ongoing contact with the elder and the Church which the family still attended three times per week.

When Tara turned 23, she made a statement at the Warrnambool Police Station, while accompanied by her counsellor.

"They would listen about but after so much time passed, there's very little evidence they can use," Tara said.

"I think this is the reason why a lot of people don't come forward and fear that no one will believe a story."

Tara's story has been heard at the Royal Commission, which this week turned its attention to the Jehovah's Witness organisation.

On Monday, the royal commission found that children were not adequately protected from the risk of sexual abuse in the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Tara said the "two-witness" rule is why no one ever believed her story.

"My dad approached the elder and took me to his house," Tara said.

"During a judicial meeting, a room of adult men told me to give details about what had happened to me.

"But I was told that because there weren't two witnesses [who could support Tara's claims] nothing would happen because I was not a credible witness. They called me a liar."

The commission found the Jehovah's Witnesses' general practice was not to report child sex abuse allegations to police or authorities unless required to do so by law, which demonstrated a serious failure to provide for the safety and protection of children in the organisation and the community.

"We do not consider the Jehovah's Witness organisation to be an organisation which responds adequately to child sexual abuse," the commission said in a report last month.



Tara, who still suffers from nightmares and needs her dog to sleep at the end of her bed, lives in Queensland. Source: *Supplied*

Tara moved to Queensland almost 18 months ago, after living in Western Australia and other parts of Victoria following her alleged abuse.

But when she was 17, Tara found herself on the wrong side of the law which landed her in prison.

“I have a history of alcohol and drug abuse, and I take responsibility for my actions,” she said.

“I was involved in a car theft and drug possession and went to jail for that.”

For an unrelated reason, the elder who abused Tara was at the prison at the same time.

“I saw him, and I started to yell, and left very quickly. I wrapped my bra strap around my neck and tried to commit suicide. I didn’t tell the police why, because I didn’t think anyone would believe me.

“I think this is the reason why a lot of people don’t come forward.

“The fear of no one believing you, or the feeling of not being worthy of listening to.

“I hope this helps more people to speak out about their abuse.”

If you or someone you know has been impacted by sexual assault, support is available by calling 1800 RESPECT and asking to be directly transferred to a trauma specialist counsellor.



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