

Eureka Times-Standard (<http://www.times-standard.com>)

Fortuna woman, ex-Jehovah's Witness shares story of sexual abuse

Romy Maple said she was sexually abused as a child, elders worked to protect assaulter

By Will Houston, Eureka Times-Standard

Thursday, May 31, 2018



Romy Maple says she can finally walk on the beaches near Table Bluff without fear.

For most of her life, those breaking waves were things Maple said she was taught to fear by the man who repeatedly sexually assaulted, drugged and raped her since she was a 4-year-old girl.

Maple said she was told by her assaulter that if she ever told anyone what he was doing to her, he would throw her into the waves. He pretended to many times and even pushed her into the water once, she said.

“I really thought he was going to kill me,” Maple said in an episode of the new A&E channel series “Cults and Extreme Beliefs” that aired Tuesday.

In an interview with the Times-Standard this week, Maple said both she and her assaulter were part of the same congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Fortuna. She was a fourth generation Witness on her mother's side.

At the age of 11, Maple said she and her cousin — whom Maple said was one of the man's several victims — decided to tell one of the Jehovah's Witness elders about what was happening to them. The elders are men who lead the congregation.

Maple said the elder slammed his fist on the table and called them both liars. From when she was 11 years old up to her current age of 47, Maple said she has begged nearly 20 elders within the Jehovah's Witnesses to listen to her and do something about what happened to her and the other victims.

None would listen, she said.

Maple said she talked to other victims who are still members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. She said some of these victims have been told to remain silent and to leave it into Jehovah's hands, according to Maple.

After carrying her experiences with her for most of her life, Maple said she was given the opportunity to share her story at a conference last year in Florida. It was the first time she shared her story before such a large audience, Maple said.

This reporter attempted to contact the Jehovah's Witnesses' Fortuna Kingdom Hall and contacted the world headquarters in New York state for comment. No responses were provided by Thursday evening.

A&E also stated it contacted Jehovah's Witnesses, which declined to comment on the allegations, but provided producers a [copy of the Jehovah's Witnesses' position on child protection](#).

“Jehovah’s Witnesses abhor child abuse and view it as a crime. We recognize that the authorities are responsible for addressing such crimes,” the policy states. “The elders do not shield any perpetrator of child abuse from the authorities.”

The friend who had invited Maple to the conference was also an ex-Jehovah’s Witness and was able to connect Maple to the A&E channel for an opportunity tell her story.

After six months of filming across five states, A&E aired Maple’s story Tuesday evening as the second episode of a nine-part series, “Cults and Extreme Beliefs.”

Maple said she moved to Florida to get as far away from the hurt and damage she felt in Fortuna. But after sharing her experience last year, Maple said she is ready to confront her past and moved back to Fortuna in February with a mission.

“I’m going to do everything in my power to create a voice, awareness and show people that there is hope and that there is safe in a world that we’re taught to fear,” Maple told the Times-Standard.

Maple said she is no longer a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but it was only a recent decision to leave. She said she officially left the group — which she now considers to be a cult — eight years ago shortly after her mother died. In the A&E episode, Maple said she continued being a Jehovah’s Witness for so long because of a combination of love for her mother and guilt.

After leaving the group behind, Maple said she realized how much her life had been controlled as a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

While she had her daughter, Maple said she felt alone, afraid of everyone and began to have night terrors.

“I got to a point where I wanted to take my life,” Maple told the Times-Standard. “I wanted to walk off my dock and I was dreaming of it.

“ ... I was heartbroken,” Maple continued, her voice breaking slightly.

But after sharing her story at the Florida conference and on A&E, Maple said she “felt a fire in me.”

She said she now wants to seek justice for her children and “validation in my own heart for being systematically ignored my entire life.”

Maple has since created a website and is the process of creating a new organization called “707 SAFE” — which stands for Sexual Assault Fighters Elite — in order to bring awareness of sexual assault within the Jehovah’s Witnesses and create a space where survivors can be validated, share their stories and be able to move on. Her ultimate goal is to create a local conference where survivors can meet.

Maple said she is still weighing the decision of whether to confront her abuser, who she said still lives in Fortuna.

Both Maple and A&E stated they are not releasing identifying information of the man for legal reasons. Although Maple said she wants to bring charges against the man, the statute of limitations for sexual assault cases for victims who are 16 years old or younger is seven years.

“When you get out and you escape and you start thinking for yourself, usually it’s way past seven years,” Maple said. “So then what? You’re out here trying to figure out the world having no idea. I was married at 17. You’re so isolated so you don’t get to learn those fundamentals. So not only do you walk out of this place alone, you’re trying to pick up the pieces alone.”

Maple said she is advocating for legislation that will remove this statute of limitations so that she can file charges against the man and allow other victims to do the same. While Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation in

2016 which ended the statute of limitations in certain rape and child molestation cases, the law is not retroactive.

Maple said she and her family moved to Alaska when she was 10. She said she would return to Fortuna to visit the family who took care of her when her mother was fighting Hodgkin lymphoma. It was during one of these trips that she and her cousin attempted to tell an elder what happened to them.

Maple said the distance of her new Alaska home from her abuser made her feel safe enough to tell her brother what had happened who subsequently told their mother. Maple said her mother believed her and filed a report with the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office, but Maple said elders in the Fortuna Kingdom Hall elders called Maple a liar and worked to protect the man. Maple said the police talked to her abuser as well as the elder that called her a liar and the investigation was shut down.

"They wanted to make this a secret. They wanted to appear on the outside world that they're this clean congregation, but the secrets that they hold," Maple said before cutting off.

Since the A&E episode aired on Tuesday, Maple said she has received hundreds of messages of support and at least 75 messages from other sexual assault survivors.

Maple said Humboldt County feels brand new since she has returned. She said she loves the smells, the ocean and taking pictures of the flowers.

"I did come back here with a mission. I came back here to finish my story and finish my book, 'Shocked into Silence: A Little Girl Forgotten,'" Maple said. "I don't know where I'm going after this, but it's all spiraling up from here. Somewhere beautiful. I just want to take everybody with me and give everybody hope."

The A&E episode can be watched online through your cable provider on www.aetv.com/shows/cults-and-extreme-belief/season-1/episode-2 or A&E On Demand and the A&E app. The episode is set to air throughout this weekend on A&E, with viewers being asked to check their local listings for showtimes.

Maple said she invites other survivors to contact her through her website if they would like to share their stories at www.romymaple.com.

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URL: <http://www.times-standard.com/general-news/20180531/fortuna-woman-ex-jehovahs-witness-shares-story-of-sexual-abuse>

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