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Jehovah's Witnesses cover up child sex abuse and oust a victim

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By *Trey Bundy* (<https://www.revealnews.org/author/treybundy/>) / July 30, 2015



McALESTER, Okla. – In the summer of 2012, the elders in Debbie McDaniel's congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses expelled her for having a sexual relationship with a woman. They announced her punishment to the congregation and notified the organization's headquarters in New York. The consequences were clear: She would be shunned by the Witnesses – including her mother, father, sister and brother – and lose her chance at eternal life.

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Jehovah's Witnesses call their version of excommunication disfellowshipping, a punishment by shunning to rid the faithful of bad associations with those who break the laws of God. Once they're expelled, the disfellowshipped cannot have any contact with Witnesses, even polite acknowledgment on the street, until they have proved their repentance and willingness to return obediently to the organization. In some cases, they're shunned for the rest of their lives.

The disfellowshipping in 2012 was the second time that McDaniel, now 46, had been shunned by the Witnesses in her small hometown of McAlester in southeastern Oklahoma. When she was 18, elders responded to rumors that she had become sexually active by summoning her to confess the details of her sexual history. The meeting was a spiritual tribunal presided over by three elders with the power to expel sinners they deem unrepentant.

“They ask very, very personal, embarrassing questions,” McDaniel said. “Not just did you have sex with this person, but did you have an orgasm? Did you enjoy it? Where did he touch you? Where did you touch him?”

In the months leading up to that 1987 hearing, McDaniel said, the congregation's top elder, Ronald Lawrence, had staked out her apartment and questioned her about rumors that she was promiscuous.

“He wanted to know if I had been having sex,” she said. “Ronnie came by my apartment and told me that he was going to see to it that I was ousted to keep the congregation clean.”


Lawrence hadn't just called for McDaniel's hearing; he'd acted as the committee's chairman and voted to push her out. The elders disfellowshipped McDaniel for porneia, a biblical term describing sexual acts deemed immoral, such as adultery, homosexuality and "loose conduct."

It wasn't the first time Lawrence had used his power against her. According to McDaniel, he had sexually abused her for five years, starting when she was 8 years old.


"I thought it ironic," she said, "that the man who had molested me was now going to oust me to keep his congregation clean."

As a case study into the secretive world of Jehovah's Witnesses, McDaniel's recent shunning is particularly striking. Her family, her congregation and the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses chose to embrace an elder they had evidence was a predatory pedophile, while rejecting one of his alleged victims because she was a lesbian.

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McDaniel's story adheres closely to others told by Witnesses who say they have been sexually abused (<http://www.revealnews.org/article/jehovahs-witnesses-use-1st-amendment-to-hide-child-sex-abuse-claims/>). The religion's parent corporation, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, has instructed elders in all 14,000 U.S. congregations to avoid costly lawsuits by keeping cases of child abuse secret, even from law enforcement. And it has effectively silenced members who speak up about abuse through the tortuous practice of disfellowshipping and shunning.

Since being disfellowshipped, McDaniel has fought a vicious custody battle over her daughter with her ex-husband, also a Witness, and faced relentless silent treatment from most of the people she's known for the last four decades, the same people who still call her abuser "Brother Lawrence."

"In their mind, Ronnie's a forgiven pedophile," she said. "But I've committed the unforgivable sin of speaking out against the organization about child abuse."



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She can become angry and defiant talking about her past, but she also feels ashamed of what she's been through, half joking that she's known in her old congregation as "that lesbian apostate whore." She's

embarrassed that she believed the teachings of the Witnesses for so many years, but she still has panic attacks during which she's certain that banishment has doomed her eternal soul.

“Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night in a fit and think, ‘Oh, God, what have I done?’ ” she said. “I deserve death. I left the one true religion.”

The Jehovah's Witnesses, with more than 8 million members worldwide, believe that an imminent apocalypse will end Satan's reign on earth for 1,000 years, leaving those dead and alive to face judgment by Jesus Christ. Those who break Jehovah's laws and don't repent will be destroyed. For more than a century, the organization has leveraged that scenario to compel the loyalty of millions of Witnesses around the world. For the devout, disfellowshipping is literally a death sentence.

Witnesses live by a litany of Scripture-based regulations that, if broken, can result in disfellowshipping. Among the activities that aren't allowed: smoking, stealing, gambling, violence, gluttony, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, drug use, voting, military



Debbie McDaniel shows one of her tattoos and ► talks about how her body art is inspired by her experiences as a Jehovah's Witness.

Credit: Marsha Erwin for Reveal

service, acceptance of blood transfusions, birthday or holiday celebrations, speech against the Jehovah's Witnesses organization, and all sex except that between married heterosexual couples.

True believers view disfellowshipping and the subsequent shunning as acts of love. They say that unlike banishment in other religions, disfellowshipping is designed to lead the lost back to God. And it's true that some disfellowshipped members may earn their way to reinstatement. But critics of the religion, especially those who make up a global network of ex-Witnesses, say the Watchtower has weaponized shunning to discourage members from leaving and silence dissent within the organization. The result, they say, is a legacy of emotional violence characterized by broken families, public humiliation, mental illness and, in some cases, suicide.

Midway through the last century, the Watchtower took the power to judge and punish Witnesses away from the entire membership of congregations and gave it to the elders in each kingdom hall. The Watchtower also began to emphasize the importance of keeping the organization "spiritually clean." By the early 1990s, roughly 40,000 Witnesses were disfellowshipped each year, according to Watchtower literature.

For decades, Jehovah's Witnesses literature has described the importance of cutting off unrepentant sinners, even when they are family members. A 1988 Watchtower article (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186592-thewatcher-4-22.html>) traces the roots of the organization's shunning policies to Deuteronomy, which says Israelite parents must bring rebellious children before the elders to be judged and executed "to clear away what is bad from the midst of Israel." Israelite parents even

participated in the execution of their own children to show their loyalty to God before family, the article states, because such demonstrations of devotion can be necessary to save one's own life.

A home full of bad memories



An aboveground pool once stood near this shack in the backyard of elder Ronald Lawrence's former home. In the 1970s and '80s, Debbie McDaniel said,

► *Lawrence hosted pool parties here for local Witness children.*

Credit: Marsha Erwin for Reveal

I met McDaniel in July 2014 at her office in McAlester, where she works as a property manager. She's tall and slim with straight black hair, short in the back, longer in the front. Her bangs drape to the side, framing green eyes and a long, angular jawline that hints at her Choctaw and Cherokee heritage.

McAlester, a town of 18,000 people, is known mostly for its two major employers: the Oklahoma State Penitentiary and the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant. The roads are so full of potholes that drivers slow to a crawl or swerve into opposing lanes to avoid breaking their axles in half. Flip on the radio, and every other station is broadcasting call-in Christian talk shows or country songs about Jesus.

Near the end of Electric Avenue on the northwest edge of town sits the kingdom hall of the McAlester Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, the house of worship McDaniel attended with about 100 other members for 37 years. As a child, she spent up to 50 hours a month knocking on doors and explaining to folks that they could live forever in Jehovah's post-Armageddon paradise if they would simply wake up to "the Truth."

"I'll take you to Ronnie's old house," she tells me, "the one where it happened."

A mile or so from the kingdom hall, McDaniel slows her car at a corner house with a dead, sloping lawn and wonders aloud whether anyone lives here anymore. After a pause, she hits the gas, drives up onto the yard and stops at a wire fence behind the house. She stares through the fence at a dilapidated blue shack next to an empty patch of grass where an aboveground pool used to be.

"I can remember behind this fence, behind this little addition here, he lined us up one day without any clothes on to take our picture," she says, pointing toward the shack. "Even the boys."

Lawrence moved out of the house years ago, McDaniel says. Tall weeds block much of the view of the backyard. The wooden shack has a metal roof and a rusted basketball hoop hanging off the side. In the '70s and '80s, McDaniel says, Lawrence hosted pool parties here for local Witness children.

“He would take us in there and have us put our bathing suits on, things like that,” she says. “It was his foreplay or something to getting in the pool. I thought it was fancy, like he had a pool house or something. It looks like it’s going to fall down any minute now. I wish it would.”

McDaniel remembers Lawrence having her over to spend the night, too. He would bathe her, she says, and rape her with a wooden spoon while his wife watched television in the living room. McDaniel told her parents that she didn’t like to go there but didn’t say why. She says her father told her not to disrespect Lawrence. He was a man of God. In their congregation, he was *the* man of God.

She puts the car in gear.

“Can we go?” she says. “I don’t want to stay here.”

The first disfellowshipping



Debbie McDaniel (top left) is shown with her brother, sister, mother and father before she was disfellowshipped by the Jehovah's Witnesses and ► shunned by her family.

Credit: Courtesy of Debbie McDaniel

McDaniel was born in 1969 to an engineer and a housewife in Houston, where her father, Wendell Marley, worked for NASA. He helped design and build the spacecraft that delivered Neil Armstrong to the moon.

The Witnesses drew Marley's family into the religion in 1974. McDaniel's father was taken with their philosophy of peace and organizational unity. Believing he had found the one true religion, he quit the space program, moved the family to McAlester and dedicated himself to full-time ministry.

With such an accomplished man joining their ranks, the Witnesses saw an opportunity to turn Marley's defection into some good public relations. In 1982, an edition of Watchtower magazine (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186595-thewatchtower-5-1-1982.html>) featured an account of his journey from the secular world of science to the spiritual realm of Jehovah's kingdom. He rose quickly in the McAlester congregation and became an elder, while the rest of the family members busied themselves with kingdom hall meetings, door-to-door ministry and Bible study.

That was also when they met Lawrence.

"I was introduced to Ronnie as somebody quite Christ-like," McDaniel said. "He was the presiding overseer of the congregation at the time, and people revered him."

Lawrence owned a small janitorial company and was the one elder in town with more influence over the Witnesses than McDaniel's father. Although McDaniel hadn't told anyone that Lawrence was abusing her, she said, he stopped when she was 13. By that point, she was a wreck: depression, anorexia, hair falling out in clumps. She rebelled against her parents' authority and started experimenting sexually with boys and girls her own age. She said her parents kicked her out of the house a week after she graduated high school.

Although Witnesses are taught to ignore gossip, Lawrence seemed to always know when McDaniel had struck up a new liaison. "He became obsessed with me," she said. "You would see him looking through the windows of my apartment."

That went on for months, McDaniel said, until Lawrence

disfellowshipped her at 18.

The week before she was disfellowshipped, she told her mother that Lawrence had abused her. She had never spoken about it, she said, and her mother didn't believe her, accusing McDaniel of trying to hurt Lawrence for wanting to kick her out.

“Just trying to adjust to life outside the organization was too much for me,” she recalled. “Within months of being disfellowshipped, I applied for reinstatement. I had to write Ronnie a letter and ask for reinstatement, telling them at this point I was very sorry for my actions and I just wanted back in.”

The elders instructed her to attend every meeting but to sit alone in the back. No one in the congregation could speak to her until she was reinstated officially, which took several months. Grateful to reunite with her family, McDaniel dove back into the organization, determined to be the best Witness Jehovah had ever seen. She preached more than ever. She never missed a meeting. And she didn't mention her abuse again to anyone for 10 years.

McDaniel shut the door on sex with women and married a man from the congregation, Chuck Groves. Within two years, the couple were sleeping in separate rooms, she said.

She was 29 and pregnant with their daughter in 1998 when out of nowhere, a woman from her congregation pulled her aside and said, “I know Ronnie molested you, too.”

Child abuse comes to light



► *Reveal reporter Trey Bundy confronts Debbie McDaniel's alleged abuser, Ronald Lawrence, a former elder whom McDaniel says she still bumps into around town.*

Credit: Marsha Erwin for Reveal

The Watchtower's child abuse protocols read like a mashup of Scripture and corporate policy. From a [1989 Watchtower letter](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186618-1989-watchtower-letter.html) (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186618-1989-watchtower-letter.html>) to all U.S. elders describing the importance of secrecy: “Often the peace, unity, and spiritual well-being of the congregation are at stake. Improper use of the tongue by an elder can result in serious legal problems for the individual, the congregation, and even the Society.”

According to Watchtower policies, when an elder receives a report of child abuse by a member of the congregation, he is not to take action against the accused unless there are two witnesses (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186576-jw-memo.html>) to the crime. That policy comes from Deuteronomy 19:15: “No single witness should rise up against a man respecting any error or any sin. ... At the mouth of two witnesses or at the mouth of three witnesses the matter should stand good.”

When Ronald Lawrence's victims began to come forward, the McAlester elders followed the Watchtower's policies to the letter.

According to documents from inside the McAlester congregation, the woman who approached Debbie McDaniel (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186622-the-woman-who-approached-debbie.html>) had gone to elders, including McDaniel's father, in 1994, accusing Lawrence of molesting her. Reveal is not naming the woman because she is a victim of sexual abuse and wishes to remain anonymous.

That July, having tried and failed to identify witnesses to the abuse, the elders laid out the allegations in a letter to the Watchtower. Lawrence had denied the allegations, they wrote, but the next day said: “We did do a lot of horsing around in the pool. If she says I did something, I'm sure the accusations are real in her mind. I did not intentionally do anything wrong.”

The elders wrote that they had suspected sexual misconduct by Lawrence “over a period of years in the past” but that nothing was ever proven. “Since there was only one witness,” they wrote, “with no

admission of wrongdoing, Brothers Marley and (Daryl) Watson informed Brother Lawrence that no further action would be taken and the matter would be left in Jehovah's hand."

When Lawrence's accuser approached McDaniel in 1998, the two went to the elders, who again wrote to headquarters in New York. The Watchtower advised the elders to set a meeting between Lawrence and his alleged victims. Have them confront him, the Watchtower ordered, and report back on Lawrence's reaction. (McDaniel is referred to by her married name at that time, Groves, in these documents.)

Subsequent letters show that McDaniel and Lawrence's first accuser confronted him in the presence of elders, and a third accuser submitted his allegations in writing. Lawrence denied any wrongdoing. Still, the elders asked the Watchtower, "Do we have an obligation to report to secular authorities?" The Watchtower did not answer that question in writing, but in a sworn deposition years later, McDaniel's father testified that, on the advice of legal counsel, the elders did not call the police.

Despite Lawrence's denials, the McAlester elders disfellowshipped him May 13, 1999. Lawrence appealed the decision but lost. A document containing notes on the appeal hearing, dated May 1, 1999, describes new reports of Lawrence abusing children and names three more possible victims: "Among these, who claim to be abused by him, are Brother Lawrence's son ... who was disfellowshipped as a homosexual and committed suicide (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186615-committed-suicide.html#annotation/a233235>) in December."

The elders informed the Watchtower that they suspected Lawrence could have more victims – other children who had visited his home in the 1970s and '80s – and asked whether they should investigate. The Watchtower wrote back that it would not be “the course of wisdom (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186621-the-course-of-wisdom.html>) for the elders to take the initiative to approach these possible victims concerning this matter.”

The elders announced to the congregation that Lawrence had been disfellowshipped, but in accordance with Watchtower policy, they did not say why. Meanwhile, Lawrence wasted no time trying to work his way back in.

“Ronnie was there for his own disfellowshipping announcement,” McDaniel said. “He never missed a single meeting.”

A June 1999 letter from elders to the Watchtower says Lawrence continued to deny molesting children and requested reinstatement, even though three witnesses have “clearly established his guilt.” The Watchtower wrote back that Lawrence could be reinstated someday, but it might take years. Lawrence was determined. As a disfellowshipped Witness, he could no longer join Bible study sessions or preach door to door for the congregation, but he still could attend meetings every week, sitting in the back as the Witnesses dutifully shunned him.

He also waged a letter-writing campaign, pleading with the Watchtower to reinstate him. In a handwritten letter dated Dec. 6, 1999, he wrote, “I am not claiming innocence,” and admitted to “loose conduct” with one of his accusers while swimming. “I did not

consider it fornication as it was just unnecessary touching,” he wrote, still denying that he abused McDaniel and the third accuser. “All I am doing is begging for mercy.”

Less than a year later, Lawrence got his wish. Documents show that he was reinstated Nov. 30, 2000. Beforehand, the elders handed McDaniel a letter. It was from Lawrence.

Debbie:

I humbly want to apologize for the hurt + pain I have caused you and for denying it. I have truly sinned against you Jehovah + the Congregation. I betrayed the trust that was put in me.

For the past year I have prayed daily that Jehovah will forgive me and I hope in time you will also. Even tho I have committed these sins the truth and worshipping Jehovah is all I live for. If I make the paradise maybe we can be brother and sister again. I hope so.

Sincerely

Ronald Lawrence

McDaniel felt dirty, she said, like Lawrence was using her once again.

“I asked the elders, ‘Was this a requirement for reinstatement?’ because it just smelled of that,” she said. “They said, ‘Yes, we requested that he do that as a condition of reinstatement.’ So it didn’t carry much weight with me. Every victim that he had acknowledged, that he had admitted to, got an apology letter.”

But over the next five years, more victims came forward, victims Lawrence never had mentioned. Documents show (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186626-may-13-1999.html>) that he was disfellowshipped again Sept. 1, 2005, for abusing children and lying about it. Although Lawrence's expulsion document shows that he confessed to elders, they still did not call the police.

Lawrence continued attending meetings. He was shunned, but McDaniel worried about the safety of children in the congregation and asked the elders to notify police, after she saw Lawrence picking up a young girl from school one day. In court testimony last year, she said the elders, including her father, told her and Lawrence's other victims to keep quiet about their abuse.

“We were called in and told that it would bring reproach on the congregation's name, I would be allowed no privileges in the congregation and could be disfellowshipped if I came forward with that information,” she said.

In 2010, the McAlester elders reinstated Lawrence for the second time, according to interviews and news reports.

Fighting for her daughter

McDaniel was still a Witness when the congregation welcomed Lawrence back again. Her daughter, Marley – named for McDaniel's maiden name – had turned 10, and her marriage to Groves had become little more

than a living arrangement. In 2012, she moved out of her house and filed for divorce. By then, she had fallen in love with a woman named Crystal McDaniel, who owned a salon in town called Legends.

Like many religions, the Witnesses point to Bible passages that condemn homosexuality. In a [Web address](#)



Debbie (right) and Crystal McDaniel (center) wed in New York in November 2013. Debbie's daughter, Marley (left), has chosen to live with the couple full time.

Credit: Courtesy of Debbie McDaniel

(http://tv.jw.org/#video/VODStudio/pub-jwb_201507_1_VIDEO) to Jehovah's followers this month, Anthony Morris, one of the organization's seven Governing Body members, discussed a 1982 article produced by the Watchtower titled "[Chickens and Hawks](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186582-awake-6-22.html) (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2186582-awake-6-22.html>)" that linked homosexuality with child abuse.

"It warned about homosexual men who prey on and advocate the right to use boys for sex," Morris said. "Shame on them."

In August 2012, the McAlester elders disfellowshipped McDaniel for being a lesbian. By then, her family knew she was gay, she said, and already had started to turn on her.

“When I was disfellowshipped for the homosexuality this time, my family in particular started giving me fits about taking Marley away from me, claiming I wasn’t fit to parent if I was going to live this lifestyle,” she said.

I spoke with Marley about her mother. She said that for about two years, her father, grandparents and aunts and uncles told her that her mother was immoral and controlled by Satan. The Witnesses forbid sexual acts between women, and McDaniel said Marley, then 12, wanted to know what her mom and partner were doing that was so bad. That’s when McDaniel made an angry joke that the Witnesses later would use against her in court.

“Marley was having a real hard time wrapping her mind around a gay lifestyle at all,” McDaniel said. “She would come into my bedroom at my apartment in the middle of the night and say, ‘Mom, I need to know. Please tell me.’ ”

In her frustration one night, McDaniel said she sarcastically told Marley: “What, do you want us to do it in front of you?”

McDaniel’s comment reached her family and the elders, who reported it to the Watchtower, according to documents from Marley’s custody hearing in 2012. The Watchtower instructed them to report it to the Oklahoma Department of Human Services as a possible case of child

sexual abuse. They did not call police when faced with accusations that Lawrence had molested McDaniel, but they brought in the authorities over this comment.

The agency found no wrongdoing on McDaniel's part, but the comment came up again in the court battle for custody of Marley. From McDaniel's father's testimony: "When Debbie tries to involve Marley in lesbian sexual activities at Marley's age, that is definitely inappropriate."

Asked whether he was shunning his daughter at the time, he said: "We view several Scriptures that specifically say to not say a greeting to them, yes, a shunning process, yes."

He also testified that the court should grant custody to Groves and allow McDaniel supervised visits only, describing his daughter as sexually immoral. When asked whether he thought that had anything to do with McDaniel's childhood abuse at the hands of a Jehovah's Witness elder, he said: "I would say possibly, yes."

Groves testified that he believed his ex-wife was being sarcastic when she made the comment to Marley. McDaniel's attorney then asked him why the elders reported the incident to authorities as an incestuous lesbian act.

"They're talking to their legal department of the society," Groves said. "They said that information had to be reported."

In April 2013, a judge granted the ex-couple joint custody of Marley. Under Jehovah's Witnesses' rules, children who live with a disfellowshipped parent cannot be forced to shun that parent. So

McDaniel said Groves and her family tried to turn Marley against her. As Marley withdrew from her mother, McDaniel tried to keep in touch through text messaging. Marley now says that when she stayed with her father and other relatives, they monitored the exchanges.

“They used to sit me down and actually tell me what to say or text me something and say just to copy and paste it and send it to her,” Marley said. “That’s what would happen sometimes, but I don’t want to place all the blame on them. I sent some of them.”

One of those texts reads: “You want to know why I’m devastated? I lost my mother. My best friend. You turned to Satan and you’re going to die.”

A criminal investigation

By October 2013, McDaniel said she felt suicidal. One night, unable to sleep, she got dressed and drove to the police station. “I said, ‘I’m not leaving here until somebody helps me stop the harassment from the Jehovah’s Witnesses,’ ” she said.

For hours, she told police about her troubles with the Witnesses, about her family shunning her and keeping her away from Marley. When she said that an elder had molested her and that the



congregation had protected him, the police told her to slow down and tell them more.

Watchtower documents reveal that Jehovah's Witnesses leadership was aware of evidence that former elder Ronald Lawrence had abused children in McAlester, Okla.

Credit: Marsha Erwin for Reveal

“It all came pouring out when I started making the statement to authorities,” she said.

McDaniel's report sparked an investigation. McAlester police seized documents from the McAlester kingdom hall showing that Lawrence had been reported to the Watchtower for abusing children. On Nov. 26, 2013, they arrested Lawrence and charged him with 19 counts of sexual abuse.

On Feb. 26, 2014, Lawrence arrived for his hearing. McDaniel walked into the courtroom and saw her parents sitting on his side.

“My mom and dad are sitting with him, and the other elders, a couple of which had been the ones to disfellowship him for the molestations, were sitting on his side,” she said. “To look over there and to see my parents sitting next to him. They wouldn't look my direction. Even when I was speaking on the stand, I looked out, and my mother and dad wouldn't look at me in the face.”

Judge James Bland dismissed the charges against Lawrence based on the statute of limitations. Assistant District Attorney Danita Williams, who brought the case, blames the congregation for covering for Lawrence for so long that he couldn't be prosecuted. After the charges were dismissed, Williams explored whether she could

prosecute the McAlester elders, including McDaniel's father, for their roles in the cover-up, but the statute of limitations had run out there, too.

"I hate it; it makes me sick," she said. "I know beyond a shadow of a doubt those crimes occurred, but the church hid it. My understanding is that church dealt with it, and victims were afraid they would be disfellowshipped if they told law enforcement."

For a year, the McAlester Police Department refused to grant interviews or provide any information on its investigation of Lawrence and the congregation for this story. Shortly before publication, Police Chief Gary Wansick called and said he was worried that the department could be sued if he shared information with Reveal.

"There might be some liability incurred if we were to make statements and weren't able to back them up in a court of law," he said. "I think it was a serious case, considering the consequences for victims involved, and I don't think we were able to see justice in this case."

Wall of silence



Reveal reporter Trey Bundy (right) talks to Debbie McDaniel's father, Wendell Marley, who is an elder in McAlester's congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. He said he wanted nothing to do with McDaniel and her "immoral lifestyle."

Credit: Marsha Erwin for Reveal

I've been to Lawrence's house twice, most recently in June, and asked him on his porch whether he had sexually abused Jehovah's Witness children as an elder. He denied it both times. When I asked him why he had written letters of apology to his accusers, he said there were "several reasons," then he shut the door. Lawrence is now 77 years old.

McDaniel's father is a stone wall as well. I found him in July 2014 at the kingdom hall 20 minutes before the weekly Thursday evening meeting. He walked in with books under his arm, lanky in a brown

suit, glasses resting on a long nose. He took me into a room in the back of the hall and said he wanted nothing to do with a story about Jehovah's Witnesses or with McDaniel and her "immoral lifestyle."

During the last year, I also tried to reach McDaniel's brother and sister, her ex-husband and several of the McAlester elders, but none returned a single call.

The Watchtower did not respond to calls and emails seeking comment.

Marley is about to turn 16 and hasn't been to a kingdom hall meeting in more than six months. She's abandoned most of the beliefs she held as a Witness and has chosen to live with her mother and Crystal McDaniel full time. She says her dad, her friends and the rest of her family have pretty much cut her off. She has not been disfellowshipped, she said, but the Witnesses have started to shun her, too.

"Obviously, all my friends a couple of years ago were all Jehovah's Witnesses, and so I've lost pretty much all of them," Marley said. "And then the rest of my family has pretty much blocked me on social media, things like that. You can't leave and not be deemed mentally diseased, I guess."

Debbie and Crystal McDaniel wed in a small ceremony in New York in November 2013, and Debbie took her wife's name. The couple and Marley have friends in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Nashville, Tennessee; Little Rock, Arkansas; and other places – mostly-ex-Witnesses and people in the LGBT community – and leave McAlester to visit them whenever they can.

They've talked a lot over the last year about moving away from McAlester to someplace without so much built-in pain, but for now, they're staying put. There's a small LGBT community in McAlester, and they want to help nurture it. They spent a year building a new house in town and moved in this month.

McAlester is small, and McDaniel knows that any time she leaves the house, she chances an emotional punch in the face. She still bumps into Lawrence about once a week, usually while shopping or going out to eat.

“When I run into him, he just quickly averts his eyes and then gets on a different aisle,” she said. “I never know what to say. I always play out these things I want to say in my head, and I'm not strong enough to do them, usually because when I see him, I feel 8 years old again.”

She runs into her old friends and family, too. They look through her like she's not there, then walk away. It breaks her heart, she said, but she's never surprised when it happens. As far as they're concerned, in Jehovah's eyes, she's already dead.

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This story was edited by Robert Salladay and copy edited by Nikki Frick. Audio-visual elements were produced by Jaena Rae Cabrera, Julia B. Chan and Delaney Hall.