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# **She says she was 5 when another Jehovah's Witness raped her. The religion's leaders call such accounts 'false stories'**

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<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/jehovahs-witnesses-child-sex-abuse-stephen-lett-chessa-manion-20180620.html?viewGallery=y>. ([http://philly.reprintmint.com/006-default.html?src=http%3A%2F%2Fmedia.philly.com%2Fimages%2F250\\*250%2Fdixon-537389-f-wp-content-uploads-2018-06-1189586\\_0fce9f1ceeb02d-](http://philly.reprintmint.com/006-default.html?src=http%3A%2F%2Fmedia.philly.com%2Fimages%2F250*250%2Fdixon-537389-f-wp-content-uploads-2018-06-1189586_0fce9f1ceeb02d-)

1200x800.jpg&verification=http%3A%2F%2Fmedia.philly.com%2Fimages%2Fdixon-537389-f-wp-content-uploads-2018-06-1189586\_ofce9f1ceeeb02d-1200x800.jpg&source=006&title=WITNESS20-B&caption=Chessa Manion says she was raped by a 14-year-old Jehovah's Witness. She is among a growing number of ex-Witnesses speaking out about abuse and cover-ups within the organization. )

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**JOSE F. MORENO / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

Chessa Manion says she was raped by a 14-year-old Jehovah's Witness. She is among a growing number of ex-Witnesses speaking out about abuse and cover-ups within the organization.

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Stephen Lett is 69, bald, and round-faced, with eyes that sometimes spring open to dramatic effect while he's talking — if you can manage to get an audience with him.

For much of the last two decades, Lett has been a member of the small governing body that runs Jehovah's Witnesses and sets the course for the denomination's followers at more than a dozen congregations in the Philadelphia area, and thousands more around the world. Lett and the seven other men on this committee maintain quiet profiles, their voices usually absent from media coverage about the [Witnesses' widespread child sex-abuse problems](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/jehovahs-witnesses-sexual-abuse-children-beliefs-rules.html) (<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/jehovahs-witnesses-sexual-abuse-children-beliefs-rules.html>).

But in the spring of 2015, Lett unexpectedly starred in a 10-minute video that was posted on the Witnesses' website, an appearance that coincided with [a spate of stories](https://www.revealnews.org/topic/jehovahs-witnesses/) (<https://www.revealnews.org/topic/jehovahs-witnesses/>) about abuse allegations and cover-ups published by [Reveal](https://www.revealnews.org/), (<https://www.revealnews.org/>) from the Center for Investigative Reporting.

Dressed in a dark suit, he grew animated as he urged followers to stay united by “rejecting false stories.”

>> ***READ MORE: [For Jehovah's Witnesses, an insular culture and archaic rules have created a 'recipe for child abuse'](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/jehovahs-witnesses-sexual-abuse-children-beliefs-rules.html)*** (<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/jehovahs-witnesses-sexual-abuse-children-beliefs-rules.html>)

“As an example, think about the apostate-driven lies and dishonesties that Jehovah’s organization is permissive toward pedophiles,” Lett said. “I mean, that is ridiculous, isn’t it? If anyone takes action against someone who would threaten our young ones, and takes action to protect our young ones, it is Jehovah’s organization.”

With just a few sentences, Lett dismissed the criticism that has been levied against the Witnesses by authorities, victims and attorneys from Australia ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/28/australian-jehovahs-witnesses-protected-over-a-thousand-members-accused-of-child-abuse-report-says/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.4848c5270bf7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/28/australian-jehovahs-witnesses-protected-over-a-thousand-members-accused-of-child-abuse-report-says/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4848c5270bf7)) to Pennsylvania (<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/jehovahs-witnesses-children-sexual-abuse-arrest-20180524.html>) and the United Kingdom (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/26/mps-demand-action-over-jehovahs-witness-abuse-allegations>).

A Kentucky woman named Chessa Manion argues that her own experience shows that the opposite is true — that top Witnesses leaders know the organization’s child molestation issues run deep, yet refrain from addressing them. Many other victims have made this same claim, too.

But the 29-year-old ex-Witness — who recently appeared at a rally in Harrisburg (<http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/maria-panaritis/catholic-child-sex-abuse-attorney-general-grand-jury-report-josh-shapiro-pittsburgh-allentown-erie-statute-limitations-pa-lawmakers-maria-panaritis-20180613.html>), calling for lawmakers to strengthen laws protecting child sex-abuse survivors — is a little different. She has a letter from Stephen Lett to back her up.

## **‘Tell Mommy what happened’**

Manion’s story began in the early 1990s, when her family moved from the Chicago area to Havana, a small town of about 3,600 people near the Illinois River. Her parents, Tim and Lisa, were Witnesses with a special connection to the top of the organization: Tim said he’d been recruited by Lett when he was a young man and happened to buy a Chevrolet Corvair from Lett at an old barn lot nearby.

As Manion and his wife finished moving into their new house on a leafy block lined with Victorian homes, another family of Witnesses they knew well invited their then-5-year-old daughter, Chessa, to a sleepover at their house. They promised to bring her back the next morning for service at the Kingdom Hall.

“When they showed up at the meeting,” Chessa Manion said, “I ran to my mom and put my arms around her, and wouldn’t let go. I was just staring at her. She could tell something was wrong.”

Her mother questioned her over lunch. Had she gotten in trouble at the sleepover? Yelled at, maybe, by one of the adults?

No, Chessa told her — something had happened with the other family’s then-14-year-old son.

“Tell Mommy exactly what happened,” her mother said.

At her mom’s urging, Chessa used one of her stuffed animals to show what the teen did to her. Lisa Manion believed her daughter had been raped.

The Manions took their daughter to a doctor, who confirmed their fears. “We felt paralyzed,” Lisa said. He also warned them that he was required by law to report the incident to Illinois authorities. He gave them seven days to contact police on their own.

Chessa said her dad and the father of the teen who abused her met at a Kingdom Hall, along with the boy, who after several hours of questioning confessed. The next step seemed obvious: Tim Manion needed to go to the police.

But matters like this are more complicated than they first seem within the religion. The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, the Witnesses’ nonprofit corporation, warned elders in a 1989 memo, for example, to be careful about sharing confidential information that could serve as fodder for a lawsuit. Elders were instructed to never allow an officer to search a Kingdom Hall or any other area where secret records were stored. Those who received reports about child sex abuse were expected to simply contact the Watchtower’s legal department.

The religion also relied on a policy that required abuse victims to produce two eyewitnesses who could corroborate their claims before elders would consider taking action.

Lisa Manion, who is still a Witness, said some congregation members discouraged them from reporting the crime.

“There were friends of both families that felt if we would just make peace with this and each other that we wouldn’t have to go to the authorities,” she said in a recent interview. “However, we had brothers from Chicago telling us, ‘Jehovah will protect his own name. You do what you have to do to take care of your daughter.’ ”

Before the seven-day deadline, Tim Manion contacted the Mason County Sheriff’s Department and reported the attack. He was then referred to the county state’s attorney.

His daughter still doesn’t understand what happened next.

**‘I was not comfortable’**

Alan Tucker had prosecuted dozens of violent crimes as the Mason County State's Attorney by the time Chessa Manion's case reached his desk. But this one stuck with him over the ensuing decades.

Tucker, who is now an Illinois Circuit Court judge, said in a recent interview that a sheriff took a statement from the 14-year-old boy, who "admitted to having sexual intercourse with Ms. Manion. But the parents of each of the children downplayed the incident, trying to portray it as children being exploratory. They did not want to pursue charges."

He puzzled over what he described as the Manions' reluctance to see their daughter's abuser prosecuted. "I know they were from a nontraditional religion," he said. "I laid out the options as to how we could proceed and allowed them, for the most part, to direct me on how they wished to go."

Lisa Manion disputed Tucker's recollection. "We did not downplay anything," she said. "We wanted to make sure that the word 'rape' was used as a description of what happened. ... We only wanted to protect Chessa."

She said they were advised by Tucker that their daughter might have to undergo additional examinations and testify in court against the teen. They worried the experience would traumatize her a second time. "He steered Tim out of pursuing a court case," Lisa Manion said.

Instead of taking the case to court, Tucker said he arranged a no-contact agreement that prohibited the teen from interacting with Chessa or other small children. Both received counseling, but the teen was not required to complete a sex offender evaluation.

Had the case been successfully prosecuted, Tucker said, the teen could have ended up on probation until he was 21 and been registered as a sex offender.

Tucker said that he kept a copy of the case files in his personal records because he worried that the teen might reoffend. He dug out the files after being contacted by the Inquirer and Daily News.

"Since you called me," he said, "it's really bothered me."



Manion said her parents faced pressure from Witnesses elders who urged them to “speak more delicately” and not use the word *rape* when discussing what she had experienced. Her father called the Watchtower’s headquarters in Brooklyn and described how she’d been abused at a sleepover, she recounted, only to be chided by an official who said, “Well, Brother Manion, do you see how you contributed to this?” (Her father did not respond to a request for comment.)

The fallout from the rape spread through the family like a disease. Shortly after her father reported the incident to police, he shared Chessa’s ordeal with her grandparents and aunts and uncles at a family gathering in the Ozarks in Missouri.

“It was a very bad night,” said Debbie Manion Ford, her aunt. “A horrible night.”



**JOSE F. MORENO / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

Chessa Manion hugs State Rep. Mark Rozzi (D., Berks) minutes after a rally calling for the elimination of Pennsylvania’s statutes of limitations in child sex abuse cases.

As the family absorbed the awful news, their horror turned to outrage. Chessa’s father was the only member of the family who was a Witness, and his relatives had long been skeptical of the organization.

“We were like, ‘How can you stay in this?’ ” Ford said. “Tim just said, ‘Well, the Witnesses are going to take care of this.’ But they tried to bury it.”

Not long afterward, Chessa Manion said, she found herself with her parents at the home of her abuser and his family. “I was made to hug him,” she said, “because the elders told our families that we needed to keep the peace.”

She paused to underscore the horror of the scene: “I hugged my rapist after he raped me.”

The experience took a terrible toll on the little girl, Ford said. “Chessa got really dark.”

The family tried to leave the trauma behind by moving to another congregation 1,400 miles away in Arizona.

“My parents received a lot of opposition, even though I was only 5,” Chessa said. “I was marked as ‘dirty.’ ”

She dropped out of school at 14 and became a pioneer, a Witness who spends more than 70 hours a month on missionary work. “I tried to be a good example and show that my dedication to Jehovah would not waver,” she said. “But I didn’t get any psychological counseling. My PTSD became very bad.”

As she grew older, Manion became disillusioned with the religion. She’d never gotten a GED because she’d been so influenced by Witnesses rhetoric about the end of the world being nearly at hand. She got married at 20, and when the relationship faltered, other Witnesses encouraged her to become more submissive.

Manion learned that her abuser, meanwhile, still attended services and was still around children. But he never faced criminal charges, a fact that gnawed at her.

“I had no closure or validation,” she said. “It was like the whole thing floated away.”

When told about Manion’s despair, Tucker, the judge, grew quiet. “I would feel the same way if I was her,” he said.

## **‘Wicked mistreatment’**



In 2002, after Tim Manion saw a *Dateline* special ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/09/29/couple-is-shunned-for-airing-allegations/30ba8024-9af0-4b89-9ea8-ff902ebe0849/?utm\\_term=.a0f70d33b56b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/09/29/couple-is-shunned-for-airing-allegations/30ba8024-9af0-4b89-9ea8-ff902ebe0849/?utm_term=.a0f70d33b56b)) about child abuse and Jehovah's Witnesses, he contacted his old acquaintance Stephen Lett. Much had changed in the decades since they first met; Lett had ascended to the top of the Watchtower while Manion and his family were haunted by their memories of his daughter's rape.

"It destroyed my brother and his wife and Chessa's life," Debbie Manion Ford said. "They could never get past it."

In an anguished, five-page letter, Tim Manion told Lett about his daughter's ordeal, and how their family was rejected by other Witnesses who had learned about it. "Most of the people we have told over the years have shunned us," he wrote, according to a copy his daughter shared. "Some even thought and said openly to others that we must have done something to deserve this."

Manion appealed to Lett to rethink the Witnesses' approach to child sex-abuse allegations, including the two-witness rule. Elders were ill-equipped to handle crimes as serious as rape and sexual assault, he wrote. He argued that such matters be reported directly to law enforcement. "THIS IS NOT A RELIGIOUS SITUATION!" he wrote.

Governing body members like Lett rarely communicate directly with rank-and-file followers.



📷 JOSE F. MORENO / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Chessa Manion on the steps of the Pennsylvania Capitol.

But on June 4, 2002, Lett wrote back. “While it was painful to read about the terrible ordeal that you and Lisa and Chessa had to go through,” he wrote, “it was so good to hear how you have stayed close to Jehovah and have endured faithfully.”

Lett referred to Chessa’s rape as a “wicked mistreatment,” but didn’t address any of the urgent points Manion raised. Lett quoted Scripture and bid his old friend well. Thirteen years later, in the 2015 video, Lett’s words were far different. He confidently denounced the abuse allegations that dogged the organization as “apostate-driven lies.”

And as recently as last year, Watchtower leaders said they would continue to rely (<https://www.revealnews.org/blog/jehovahs-witnesses-double-down-on-scripture-used-to-ignore-abuse/>) on the two-witness rule.

Lett did not respond to an e-mailed request for comment. A Watchtower spokesperson declined to participate in an interview, but sent an overview of the organization’s policies, which state that victims and parents have a right to report sexual abuse to law

enforcement. “Elders do not criticize anyone who chooses to make such a report,” it reads in part. Another line notes that someone who is guilty of child molestation can remain in a congregation if they’re repentant, but restrictions will be placed on their activities.

Chessa Manion, meanwhile, is trying to pursue the closure she felt she was long ago denied.

Illinois recently [eliminated the statute of limitations](http://www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/pressroom/2017_08/20170813.html) ([http://www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/pressroom/2017\\_08/20170813.html](http://www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/pressroom/2017_08/20170813.html)) for child sex abuse survivors to come forward and report crimes they say were committed against them. But the state’s previous statutes — which would apply to her 1994 case, according to a spokeswoman from the Illinois Attorney General’s Office — gave victims up until their 38th birthday to file a report with police. Manion hopes she can have a voice in what happens next, unlike when she was a little girl and an ordinary sleepover turned into a life-altering nightmare.

“People in that religion are taught to remain silent,” she said. “And that’s what needs to change.”

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