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**SEATTLEWEEKLY**

NEWS

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## One Man's Brutal Encounter With Sexual Abuse In the Mormon Church

Transgressions involving Mormons, Scouts, and children remain a well-kept secret.

By [John Metcalfe](#)

Shortly after Robert Rinde was born in 1969, his father, Robert Larry Leroy Pitsor Sr., decided that the infant would grow up as a Mormon. It struck him as a fashionable religion to be part of.

"It was part of the Western machismo," says Anne Rinde, the mother. "He had it in his mind that all Western men were Mormons and he was going to be one, too. It's cowboy crap." It hardly mattered that Larry—the name Pitsor went by—initially wasn't a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of



Latter-day Saints. "He told me he was," adds Anne, now 63 years old. "It turned out he wasn't, but he became one later. Larry was not the most honest of human beings."

*Joseph Heidecker*

Nevertheless, young Robert thrived as a Mormon. Growing up in Seattle's Magnolia neighborhood as part of the local church's First Ward, Robert spent many happy days as a boy engaged in church-related games and activities. On weekends, he helped can foodstuffs in the warehouse of the church's Relief Society, and joined a Mormon-sponsored Boy Scout troop. "He was just Mr. Sunshine," says Anne. "He was the kid everybody wanted. He was willing to do anything for anybody."

Robert's three brothers seemed to enjoy being in the church as well, says Anne. But his sister, Kimi Kai, didn't. Robert and his lone biological sibling had a special bond—Robert's first word was his sister's name—but they differed in a critical respect: Religion didn't stick to Kimi Kai. "She made the proper noises," says Anne, "but she wasn't interested." Kimi Kai eventually ran away from home.

It seemed like she made the right choice by getting out early: In a deposition given last July, Anne said her husband was a drunk with a mean streak. "He'd pound the crap out of me given any available chance," she said. Robert described his father, who's now dead, as "sadistic" during a 2005 psychological evaluation at a Missouri psychiatric hospital. He also aired issues about his mother, saying she "is emotionally needy and is addicted to food. She weighs 600 pounds."

There was also a poverty issue: The Rindes were on welfare, and when they left Magnolia for Bellevue in the early '80s, they settled into subsidized housing. If young Robert was given presents, "he only had them a few days, and then they got taken away from him, to be returned for the money," Robert's therapist wrote during a 2003 session. "He hated getting gifts and still does not know how to accept them gracefully."

The church did what it could to bring harmony to the Rinde family through home teachers, or Mormons who are assigned to attend to certain families' spiritual and physical needs. Robert's home teacher for a time was Gordon Conger, a bright young man who would later become president of the church's Seattle Washington Temple in Bellevue, as well as a partner at a prominent law firm and a KIRO-TV executive.

Conger referred questions for this story to a lawyer for the church. In a deposition given this February, though, he recalled the Rindes requiring more commitment than the average family on his list. "[Anne] unfortunately, because of obesity and other health issues, was very minimally functional. She could barely walk around, and so that household needed a lot of help," he said. Every so often, a group of Mormon women would gather "to clean the place up and to give her a lift with household needs." Conger recalls being struck by "all of the sadness, of which there was way, way, way too much in the [Rinde] household."

In 1983, the Rindes learned the whereabouts of Kimi Kai, who had fallen out of contact for almost a year. A coroner brought the news: The 16-year-old girl's skull had been found near a cemetery in Auburn. She had incurred "homicidal violence of an undetermined nature," according to a report in the Associated Press. A decade later, her name reappeared on the long list of victims claimed by the Green River killer, Gary Ridgway.

The death hit the family hard. Later, they would change their name to Anne's mother's maiden name, Rinde, to avoid reporters. Robert was especially devastated, but didn't have much time to dwell on his sister's demise, as soon he was wrapped in his own tragedy.

Robert, who was maybe 13, went out one day to baby-sit the children of his Boy Scout troop leader. He returned wearing a mask of shock. "Robert looked like he had been shot," says Anne. "He had no color in his face—none." For the next couple of weeks, he remained unusually reserved, ignoring his mother's questions about what had happened.

Later, while rummaging around the house, Anne found some pants stashed in a closet that Robert had been wearing the day of his baby-sitting trip. They were a pair of white jeans, or at least they used to be white. "These white jeans were so soaked with blood," Anne later told lawyers, "that they could have stood on their own."

Confronted with the bloody pants, recalls his mom, Robert opened up. He told her that his Scoutmaster had assaulted him. This was quite a trip for Anne: The Scoutmaster directed the local Mormon choir and had kids of his own.

"He was a very good organist," recalls Anne of the "very short, very dark, very persnickety" Scoutmaster, who, because he could not be located for comment, will be referred to in this piece by the pseudonym "Joe." Anne says she remembers Joe publicly spanking one of his children after they wouldn't sit still at church. And now, it appeared he'd used his authority to rape her son.

A lawsuit Robert recently filed against the Utah-based Mormon church in Washington federal court alleges that Joe violated him in an apartment room, a swimming pool, a steam bath at Sand Point Naval Air Station (the Scoutmaster was in the Navy), and a Motel 6 in Issaquah. That last locale was the setting for the most sadistic attack, according to the language of the suit: "[Joe] used physical violence against Rinde, sodomizing him and forcing Rinde to orally copulate [him]. [Joe] then took a wire coat hanger and forced it into Rinde's urethra causing him to hemorrhage and causing chronic and irreparable injury to his penis and urogenital system."

Robert is now one of roughly 1,314 people residing in Starbuck, Minn. Through his live-in platonic girlfriend, he declined to comment about Joe or the church.

**Speaking from** a nursing home in Graceville, Minn., Anne says, "[Joe] knew what kind of a basket case Rob was—everybody did." Kimi Kai's death had received some press coverage, and the story was well known in the local Mormon community. "Robert was emotionally needy at that time, and [Joe] took advantage of it, bottom line."

After the motel attack, Anne filed a police report. She also contacted her longtime support group, the Mormon church. She informed her bishop, who was in charge of overseeing her ward, as well as Conger, who by that time had become something of a father figure to Robert. Conger had legal training—he'd go on to become a partner at the firm now known as K&L Gates—and Anne figured he'd know better than anyone how to handle her son's case. So that's what she had him do: take Robert to King County Superior Court so he could tell his story to a government lawyer.

On the morning of Robert's court date, Conger, the bishop, and another church member pulled up outside of the Rinde household. In her deposition, Anne recalls Conger saying something along the lines of, "[It] didn't seem like it was going to be too—just a minute—too difficult to handle, too painful, that we would be able to manage it, take care of it." The men drove to court, but when they came back, they had little news to report, according to Anne. And when she asked her son what had happened, he "sat down and he looked a little puzzled and not quite with the program. And he said, 'I'm not sure what is going on exactly, but they told me not to talk about it, not to you, not to anybody,'" with "they" being "Gordon

Conger and the other ones."

Anne waited for Robert's case to move through the legal system. She didn't bug the court clerks or the cops; but when nothing happened, she got worried. Then she says she got a letter from the county saying it hadn't found any direct evidence of an attack at the motel.

Robert later informed his mother that he never spoke with the government lawyer. "Robert told me that Gordon said that he would not allow Robert to be talked to alone, that he stood in the place of a parent. . . . And that he would stay with him while he was being questioned," said Anne in her deposition. The meeting then dissolved, according to Robert's federal suit, which claims that Conger and his companions "shielded [Joe] from the law" with the consequence that the Scoutmaster was able to "evade criminal prosecution and to move to another state." The Mormon church has since excommunicated Joe for unspecified reasons.

The church's lawyers claim the church isn't responsible for Robert's trauma. "The alleged abuse was not by a member of the clergy of the church," says Charles Gordon, a partner with Gordon Tilden Thomas & Cordell, who's defending the church in the Rinde case. As for Conger, he's "a very well-respected member of both the community at large and the legal community." In his deposition, Conger said that after taking Robert to the court, he and the bishop waited on uncomfortable wooden benches while the boy talked with the prosecutor. "I would never tamper with a witness," Conger said.

In the early '90s, Conger left his law firm to become editorial director for KIRO-TV, which was then owned by a fiduciary arm of the Mormon church. *The Seattle Times* quoted a source claiming Conger was hired "to restore the conservative corporate image KIRO once had." In 2001, Conger assumed the presidency of the Seattle Washington Temple, a position he held until 2004. He's now retired from the legal profession and living in Bellevue, where he acts as a local public-affairs director for the church.

Robert, however, struggled to recapture any sense of normalcy. Around the time he was being abused by Joe, Robert was caught naked in a bathtub with children he was baby-sitting. The incident earned him some "aversion therapy" with a Mormon doctor hired by the church, according to Anne, who drove him to his weekly appointments for nearly two years.

This therapy, as Robert described it to another therapist in 2003, consisted of talking "about sex and how bad and dirty it was, how terrible you are, and associating the whole thing with puking in the toilet with shit and every bad thing you could imagine and having rats crawl all over, forcing yourself to throw up." Robert was given a tape recorder with instructions to describe such vile mental scenes in his free time, and his doctor reviewed the tapes each week to make sure he was doing his "homework."

"They sent him to a doctor that screwed him up so bad mentally that he's just now beginning to come to grips with the stuff that was done to him there," says Anne, who also underwent an unconventional form of therapy. Around the time Kimi Kai died, she made an agreement with a psychologist to use an unoccupied room at his office, she said in her deposition, where she "could go in there and he'd close the doors and he'd go away for 15 minutes, and I could scream myself sick."

**The Mormon church** hasn't received the flogging that Roman Catholics have over the abuse of children. That could be because of the church's efforts to identify and quash predators in its ranks. In 1989, the church created an educational program about child abuse for its elders. It also established a 1-800 "abuse help line" in 1995 that connected Mormon congregation leaders with professional therapists and lawyers. The church also began tracking Mormon sex offenders by flagging their records,

ostensibly to keep them away from children.

"Cases involving child abuse brought against the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are far lower than other religious denominations," says church spokesperson Kim Farah in an e-mail. "The programs and protections the Church has put into place to combat child abuse has reduced this number even further." (Farah neglected to provide the specific number of lawsuits.)

No less a personage than the national Mormon church president, Gordon Hinckley, has expounded on the danger of church child predators. In 2002, the 96-year-old president, whom Mormons consider to be God's prophet, had this to say to his roughly 13 million-member world congregation: "I regret to say that there has been some very limited expression of this monstrous evil among us. It is something that cannot be countenanced or tolerated."

Apparently, juries in the Northwest agree: Since 2002, eight lawsuits have been filed against the church in Washington and Oregon, some yielding striking judgments. Two sisters from Federal Way received more than \$4 million in 2005; and last year, a federal jury awarded \$1.4 million to a Kent man abused as a child by his Mormon Scoutmaster (although it decided the church was only responsible for paying a minimal portion of that amount). The Scoutmaster had molested several boys, reportedly making plaster casts of their genitals; church officials who heard of his travails reportedly suggested that he merely repent and pray. Three other former Scouts also recently settled with the church for an undisclosed amount.

Becoming a Scout is a right of passage for nearly every Mormon boy. "The Mormon church has accepted the Boy Scouts as a program within the church," says Gregg Shields, national spokesperson for the Boy Scouts of America. The Mormons are one of the largest chartering organizations of Scout troops in the States, says Shields, approached in number only by the United Methodist Church.

But it isn't just Mormons who love the Scouts: Pedophiles have also been drawn to the organization's focus on children. And a lack of criminal background checks for Scout volunteers until 2003 gave scores of so-inclined Scoutmasters face-to-face access to young men. Timothy Kosnoff, an attorney for Robert Rinde, declined to comment on record about the Scouts, but Kosnoff made some pretty harsh accusations in a 2004 lawsuit involving three former Scouts who claimed they were molested by a Scoutmaster in King County about 30 years ago. (The case was settled for an undisclosed amount.)

The Scouts provide molesters "access to boys alone and away from their parents in secluded settings like camp-outs and overnight hikes," the suit alleged. There's a culture of "strict obedience to the Scout Leader and a bonding mechanism that pedophiles crave," as well as the promotion of "the idea of secret ceremonies, rituals and loyalty oaths, all of which help facilitate the pedophile's efforts to keep his victims silent and compliant." Moreover, San Francisco lawyer Diane Josephs, who has tried roughly a dozen child sex-abuse cases against the Scouts, reports that many incidents have involved "a lot of alcohol, let alone marijuana."

"One of the most striking things I found [was] that [the children's] first exposure to alcohol was through the Boy Scouts," says Josephs.

Mark Honeywell, a lawyer at Seattle firm Gordon Thomas, which is working with Kosnoff on Robert's case, has 40 boxes of internal Scouts documents that show the organization was well aware of its allure to pedophiles. "There was a time in the '70s and '80s when they were kicking guys out for sex abuse at a rate of three a week," says Honeywell. (Spokesperson Shields wouldn't "confirm or deny" that statistic.) Court

documents from this era show Mormon Scout leaders enticing children into homemade "sweat lodges," crawling into the sleeping bags of boys, and fondling children after supposedly hypnotizing them with the code phrase "aliza may daikonoshi."

In one of the most bizarre cases, a Mormon Scoutmaster in Sierra Vista, Ariz., David James Borg, invented a Dungeons & Dragons game to entice at least five prepubescent boys into having sex during spelunking expeditions. "His characters used enlarged penises as weapons, and sometimes the boys' characters had to cut off the penis of opposing characters, eat it, etc," wrote a Scouts official in a 1988 internal report. "In other words, what other pedophiles do with pornography, in tearing down inhibitions, Borg did with D&D." The official noted that Borg had previously been caught in bed with an underage boy in New Jersey, but because at the time "the church apparently [had] no 'Confidential File' it was easy for him to move to Sierra Vista and become involved with the youth program in that new ward."

The days when men like Borg could get wholesale access to Boy Scouts seem to be dwindling, according to Honeywell and Josephs, who acknowledge that the organization has been getting better at keeping its charges safe. "In the 1980s, they hired people to do studies and developed a Scout-protection program," says Honeywell. Kids entering the Scouts now read a guide about child abuse, watch movies with titles such as *It Happened to Me*, and theoretically have two adults hovering around them at all times.

"We promise to take swift action and remove people we suspect of being child abusers," says Shields. "We don't need a criminal conviction; we can act on suspicion or a report."

**To hear it** from those who have gone to the trouble of suing the Mormons, the reason the church has garnered so little negative publicity is not because it's purged itself of the sin of pedophilia but because it's extremely good at repressing its victims.

Sisters Jessica and Ashley Cavalieri won a \$4.2 million award from the church in 2005 for abuse inflicted by their Mormon stepfather in the early '90s in Federal Way. Theirs is a case example of why we haven't heard much about pedophilia in the church: The amount of hurdles the girls had to clear to get their voices heard is staggering.

Because living in modern society while also obeying the church dictums is so hard to do—drinking and premarital sex are strongly discouraged, as are caffeine, violent music and movies, and an unbalanced diet—Mormon culture is necessarily insular. "They're trying to live so differently from the rest of the world, almost like the Amish," says Jessica, now a 26-year-old student at Idaho's Brigham Young University. That means, she says, the first move when it comes to child abuse isn't always to involve the cops. "The police are outsiders. They don't have the 'true gospel,' so they don't understand things like we do."

The Mormon bishop does understand, however. He's presumed to be competent enough to oversee a ward, a land division much like a political district. The church acknowledged its bishops' roles as proper receptacles of child-abuse information when it created its 1-800 help line, which only church officials can use. If the bishop decides a victim's tale of woe is compelling enough to pick up the phone, he can talk with "professional counselors" (according to the church's Web site) who will rattle off a list of protocol questions and perhaps refer the case to a church lawyer.

Jessica, who's seen the questionnaire, describes it as containing a lot of "risk-management" inquiries—"Did the abuse happen on church property? Did it happen during a church-sponsored activity?"—which made her feel as if the church was already preparing a defense against her claims that

her stepfather was touching her at night and offering her money for sex.

The bishop can also do nothing, as was the case for Jessica. When she was 12, she told her bishop about the abuse. He sent her out of the room so he could chat in private with her parents and then dismissed the family, who went home without a word on the subject. Jessica took it for granted that the bishop had told her mother about the molestation and that her mother didn't care. Only after her stepfather confessed, five mentally hellish years later, did Jessica learn the truth: The bishop just told her mom that the two weren't "getting along" and suggested they needed to spend more time together in spiritual study. "He didn't have very much psychological training," says Jessica, "and didn't really understand that child molesters aren't something that can just be treated and cured with prayer."

When the Cavalieris finally decided to pursue their case on a nonspiritual plane, the Washington state judiciary, Jessica says two bishops she had told about the abuse denied ever hearing her tale of woe. Her best friend testified that she was "a complete psycho," while her Mormon neighbors, outside of court, called her "evil" and told her she needed to repent.

Since Jessica's story appeared in the papers, she says she's heard from approximately 50 Mormons with similar horror stories. "I think it's an epidemic," she speculates.

**One winter day** in 2005, Robert Rinde sat down to talk with Francis Manley, a psychologist at Two Rivers Psychiatric Hospital in Kansas City, Mo. He had been admitted to the institution three days prior after experiencing symptoms of dissociative identity disorder.

In his notes, Manley found the middle-aged man to be "quite bright" but "detached and watchful," writing that he wore an "unamused smile" throughout the interview. Robert complained that food and clothes turned up around his house that he couldn't remember purchasing. Other strange things were happening, as well. When he looked into a mirror, he saw "many different people" looking back, which Manley assumed to be a reference to his shattered personality. Manley presented a Rorschach test, and Robert looked into one inkblot to find "someone screaming, with their mouth wide open and their eyes wide."

Wrote Manley: "He feels that there is an intense struggle inside of him to block the negative memories from childhood."

Outwardly, Robert wasn't always so off-kilter. After Kimi Kai's murder, the family decided to move to Spokane. Robert worked for the state's workers' compensation department and found a nice Mormon girl—"Molly Mormon," as Anne Rinde called her—to marry and raise three kids with. He rose in the church ranks to become a stake-president counselor, according to Anne. His old home teacher, Gordon Conger, talked with Robert at this time and recalled in his deposition that he seemed happy.

In 1997, Robert got divorced. He told Dr. Manley his wife had left him for "someone better" and that he considered himself to be gay. He moved to Minnesota in 2002 to be near his mother, who was ill, and opened up his own business, Serendipity Books and Antiques. It was then that his life began to crumble, as chronicled in notes from various psychologists.

One wrote that Robert was sexually abused by a friend in late 2002, triggering flashbacks of the attack in the motel. He checked into Douglas County Hospital in Alexandria, Minn., where he explained that he couldn't sleep because of his nightmares. He tried to stay awake with a ration of coffee that on certain days exceeded nine pots. He wasn't able to pass the time like most people by watching TV because he was afraid of encountering violent images. Robert also experienced auditory hallucinations, once telling his

doctor that he heard a man's voice emanating from somewhere within his bedroom saying, "The room is quiet." This made him "curious," but not distressed.

Robert eventually closed down his bookstore. He questioned his decision to have kids and sank into deep bouts of depression. "Rob has been puking for the last 4 days, uncontrollably, whether he eats or not. He has been extremely down and wants to die," wrote one therapist. "He said no one has ever believed him in his life, that he was made to tell himself that he was a piece of shit and no good and deserved the treatment he got. He believes it."

It's not so uncommon for a person who went through sexual trauma to experience the worst aftereffects decades later. It's also not uncommon for the Mormon church to bungle the handling of such personal crises, at least according to Julie Lank, who blocked out years of abuse as a child by her Mormon truck-driver father in eastern Oregon. Lank, now 44 and living in Santa Fe, says it wasn't until shortly after she gave birth in 1990 that she began to remember the things done to her. "I woke up screaming at the top of my lungs, remembering that my father used to rape me," she says.

Following a 1979 conviction for the sexual abuse of her stepsister, Lank's father had some of his church privileges revoked, says Lank, but then was accepted back into the Mormon fold. Lank wanted to level her own accusations, so she got in touch with Rinde's old confidant, Gordon Conger, who, she says, advised her to hold a meeting in a church setting and drove her to meet her dad in Vancouver, Wash. There, she says her father didn't deny or admit to the charges. And that was the end of that.

"The meeting had nothing to do with helping me, had nothing to do [with] taking appropriate action against my father," says Lank. Later, as a student at the University of Utah, she tried taking her grievances to the national level by visiting the Mormon church's director of social services, telling him about her experiences and how frustrated she was. "He proceeded to tell me he didn't want his job and turned down the offer two or three times before he accepted it," she says. "He was pathetic."

Lank has since asked the Mormon church to expunge her name and records from its files. She notes with some humor that the letter announcing her erasure from the church came back mistakenly addressed to "Dear Sister Lank." Her mental health, she says, has improved greatly. "It enabled me to get my life back fully," she says.

Meanwhile, when Robert informed the church of his history a couple of years ago, the church responded by providing him with more mental counseling, which has had spotty efficacy. "He just spent a month in psychiatric care in a special facility for adults who were abused as children," says Anne Rinde. "He gets a little better, and then it seems he gets worse."

Robert now spends most of his time at home with his son and his platonic partner. He sometimes talks with his mother over the phone late at night about his court case. As one of his legion of therapists noted, he no longer considers himself Mormon, but his "religious commitment is rated as important to him."

And it is to the church, too. A few years ago, Anne received a letter from a Mormon bishop in California. The bishop wrote to tell her that Joe was reapplying to be a member of the church. Would the family forgive him?

"You don't want to know what I said," says Anne.

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