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The Sinful Messiah: Part Four — An incident involving Howell, a young girl

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK © 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald Mar 1, 1993

Marc Breault played a computer game — a simulation of the TV show "Star Trek" — while he waited outside the bedroom of cult leader Vernon Howell one night in 1989.

A blind man staying up to see what he could see wasn't as ludicrous as it sounded. Although legally blind, Breault had some vision. When bowling, for example, he could see a "triangle of white," although he had trouble picking out individual pins.

Breault wanted to know if Howell, the prophet leader of the Waco-based cult called the Branch Davidians, was having sex with a 13-year-old Australian girl.

He had objected when Howell talked of bringing her to America, Breault told a Michigan court a year ago during a child custody case concerning another child in the cult.

Breault had watched quietly while Howell proclaimed the right to have sex with the single women in the cult, but the Australian girl was different.

It wasn't just her age.

The girl had not been raised as a Branch Davidian, a bizarre spinoff of the Seventh-day Adventists. He told Howell that it wasn't right to bring over such an innocent girl just to have sex with her, Breault said.

Howell, after their argument, said he would not take the Australian girl as a wife, Breault said, but when she and her family came to live at Mount Carmel, the cult's base 10 miles east of Waco near the Elk community, Breault began to suspect Howell had

lied to him.

So Breault set a trap.

Late one night, he entered an office on the first floor of what had been the cult's old church. Upstairs was Howell's bedroom. Breault wrote a few unimportant letters on his computer, in case anyone asked what he was doing there.

Mostly, he played a computer game — and waited.

The next morning, the Australian girl emerged from Howell's bedroom, Breault said. He called out a greeting. Surprised, the girl asked why Breault was there. Just getting an early start, he said. She shrugged and left.

"I realized it wasn't a matter of Biblical anything," Breault testified in Michigan. "He just wanted to have sex with her. Because she really didn't know what he was teaching."

Breault and other former cult members said Howell had talked publicly about having sex with underage girls — in 1986 telling his followers that God had ordered him to "give seed" to a 14-year-old American girl.

Two years later, when Breault broke up with a girlfriend, Howell consoled him by talking about his own problems. He said it wasn't easy trying to please all his wives in the House of David — the harem of single women in the cult whose children were supposedly destined to rule the next life with Howell.

Howell asked him to guess his favorite wife, Breault said.

He named Howell's legal wife, Rachel Howell. No, Howell told him. Not her. Breault said he rattled off more names, but not the name of Howell's favorite wife.

Finally, Breault gave up.

Howell did the talking

Howell said his favorite wife was Rachel's younger sister, Breault told the Michigan court in 1992.

Breault said he never forgot Howell's next words.

"Can you believe it, Marc? She's been with me since she was 12 years old."

Howell's secret eventually became the talk of the Branch Davidians. And Howell did the talking, 10 former cult members said.

Bruce Gent, an Australian once in the cult, said he was in a Bible study when he heard Howell relate the first time he had sex with his wife's sister.

"When he got into bed with her, she was only about 12," Gent said. "He talked about taking her pants off. There was a big fight. She was trying to look after her own, to protect herself. He made a big joke of it. A warped bloody mind he's got."

Robyn Bunds, a former "wife" of Howell's, remembers not questioning Howell's account of having sex with his wife's sister.

"But now that I'm out here, living a normal life, I realize it was rape," Bunds said. "It was rape. When he describes it, he says (the girl) thought he was getting into bed to get warm. That's what he said. When he tried to pull down her panties, she tried to get him not to. She was 12 years old. She trusted him. He's her sister's husband. She was 12. I remember being 12. She resisted, but he kept on going because he said God told him to. Psychologically, it's weird. But you got used to it. It was normal."

The girl's brother, Joel Jones, who fled the cult, also said that Howell had sex with his sister.

"There was no mystery," Jones said. "You were either blind or you could see. There was a lot of perversion going on out there. Vernon going after all those young girls. It's not right. It's not a normal life."

According to state records, Jones' sister gave birth to a baby girl Feb. 3, 1989. She was 14.

The space on the birth certificate for the father's name was left blank.

Howell denies fathering any children in the cult besides the two, Cyrus and Star, born to his legal wife, Rachel, whom he married when she was 14 years old.

Birth certificates show that at least two single women and one girl identified by former cult members as Howell's so-called wives had babies. None of them listed their babies' father on the birth certificate.

No recorded father

A copy of the California birth certificate for Wisdom Bunds records his birth in Pomona on Nov. 14, 1988. Robyn Bunds is listed as the mother, but there is no recorded father.

Bunds, 23, has since changed her son's first name to Shaun.

She said Howell is the boy's father. Howell ordered her not to list his name on Shaun's birth certificate, Bunds said.

"Why do you have to put unknown for the father-" Robyn Bunds asked. "Think about it. He was afraid someone was keeping track of all the babies he was having."

Dana Okimoto, then 22, gave birth to a son, Sky Borne, on Sept. 10, 1988, in Torrance, Calif.

No father is listed. The birth certificate says "Declined to state."

Okimoto refused to identify the father of her son, but former cult members — including Bunds, who traveled with Okimoto from Mount Carmel to the Los Angeles area in 1988 for the birth of their babies — said Howell is the father.

A former cult member listed until 1991 as a midwife in McLennan County said Howell eventually quit registering many of the babies born at Mount Carmel.

Jeannine Bunds, Robyn's mother, said she delivered twin girls to Howell's young sister-in-law at Mount Carmel in 1991. A nurse, Bunds said she also delivered Okimoto's second baby. According to Bunds, Howell directed her not to register the births, which is a Class C misdemeanor.

Howell was reportedly not discreet within the Branch Davidians about his sexual relationships, though.

During a Bible study, Howell talked about the first time he had sex with the 13-year-old Australian girl, two former cult members said. Howell said the girl's heart beat so hard that he could actually hear it.

"You know when an animal's scared, how its heart just pounds-" Robyn Bunds asked. "That's how Vernon said her heart sounded. Like when you're hunting something is how he put it. That's how he said the heart of all the girls are when he's with them for the first time."

Howell dismisses the charge that he had sex with underage girls. He argues that former cult members who make the allegations are followers of Breault. However, Robyn Bunds heatedly denies Howell's contention, calling it "part of his paranoia."

Peter Roenfeldt, pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Melbourne, said Breault attends his church regularly.

"I have heard that is a rebuttal that is coming from the cult in Waco, Texas, but he certainly has not held himself out as a prophet in any sense, certainly not in the three, three-and-a-half years that I've known him."

The fear that Howell took minors to the cult as "wives" led a Michigan man to take legal action last year.

David Jewell, never a cult member, sued for custody of his daughter, Kiri, then 10, after an October 1991 telephone call from Breault. Jewell's ex-wife is a longtime Branch Davidian.

Breault asked David Jewell if his daughter wore a pendant.

As Breault had predicted, she wore a Star of David. What Breault said next enraged Jewell and made him fear for Kiri's safety.

"He said Kiri was targeted," Jewell said.

All Howell's wives or wives-to-be wore a six-sided Star of David. Breault told a St. Joseph, Mich., court in February 1992.

Breault, his wife Elizabeth Baranyai, and Jean Smith, all former cult members, paid their way to Michigan to testify on behalf of David Jewell.

Howell wanted Kiri Jewell for his harem, Breault testified.

During the summer of 1989, Breault said he and Kiri, along with her mother, met Howell while walking at Mount Carmel.

"Howell walked up and said hello," Breault wrote in a sworn affidavit. "He asked Kiri whether she had been behaving lately. Kiri responded that she had been behaving. Howell said this was good, because if she wanted to be in the House of David, she would have to be a good girl."

Robyn Bunds also said she heard Howell discuss the House of David with Kiri.

"If Kiri and her friends acted up, Vernon would say, 'You have to act like ladies if you want to be in the House of David,'" Bunds said. "It blew me away."

Judge Ronald Taylor granted joint custody of Kiri Jewell to her parents, but he ordered Jewell's ex-wife to keep her young daughter away from Howell.

The suffering started early at Mount Carmel, according to former cult members, who said that Howell at one time taught that parents should spank their children at 8 months of age.

It was full-contact whipping, too, enough to leave its mark on a baby's buttocks, according to former cult members. They said Howell didn't spare the rod, often using a large wooden spoon with a straight handle and almost spatula-like bottom.

Howell denied the allegation. He teaches that babies be "constrained" for discipline, Howell said. Starting at age 4, discipline should include spanking, he said.

But former cult member Michelle Tom told the Michigan court differently, in a sworn affidavit. She wrote that Howell hit Tarah Tom, her daughter by husband James Tom, on her buttocks with the wooden spoon for more than 30 minutes in 1988.

Tarah earned Howell's wrath by crying when put on his lap, the affidavit said.

"My baby was 8 months old at the time and when he finished her bottom was badly bruised and bleeding," Tom wrote.

A former cult member, who does not wish to be identified, saw Tarah shortly after the whipping and said "her bottom was completely black and blue."

Tom, who later left the cult, did not protest the whipping.

"It's like you're in shock," she said in an interview. "He always played on your emotions. If I had shown emotion, he might have taken her away from me or something."

She wanted to grab Tarah and leave Mount Carmel, Tom said. It was the first real whipping her daughter had received. But it was only wishful thinking — "How do you get out with a child through an armed guard in the middle of winter-"

Howell didn't just punish the children of other Branch Davidians, former cult members said. He was particularly harsh to his son, Cyrus.

Boy slept in garage

Once, Cyrus refused to call Nicole Gent "mommy," Breault told the Michigan court. She had been babysitting the boy. Howell ordered his son to sit next to Gent, the daughter of Bruce Gent and reportedly one of his "wives." When Cyrus, then about 3 years old, refused, Howell forced him to sleep on the kitchen floor and go without food.

After a couple of days, Howell told Nicole Gent to feed Cyrus, who was so weak he could not eat by himself, Breault testified.

That night, Howell made Cyrus sleep in the garage of the cult's house in Pomona, Calif. Howell told the boy that large rats prowled the garage, and they ate naughty boys, according to former Branch Davidian James Tom.

Tom said Howell ordered him to take Cyrus to the garage.

"I told Vernon that it wasn't a good idea, because there were rats there," Tom wrote in an affidavit. "Vernon made me take him anyway and told me to make sure I told Cyrus that there were rats. The child was terrified. Cyrus was made to sleep on a hard bench taken out of the shuttle bus and was beside himself with fear."

During a 1986 Bible study in Palestine, Texas, Cyrus, then about 1 year old, began crying Bruce Gent said.

The baby had been left alone inside a bus.

Howell, irritated at the disruption, made several trips to the bus to strike his son, Gent said. Each whipping reportedly lasted several minutes.

The boy's screams from the bus haunted the church, Gent said.

"After 5 to 10 minutes, the cries became whimpers and Vernon would return," said Breault, who was also at Palestine. "Then Cyrus would start crying again. Vernon would go back to the bus. You could hear the spanks from where we were."

Neither Cyrus' mother Rachel Howell nor any other member in the cult left to comfort the baby, Breault and Gent said.

"It's hard to understand if you've never been there," Breault said. "But we're talking about a man who was supposed to be a prophet. He was giving the words of life. You were not supposed to miss out."

Eating cinnamon

Jean Smith, a former cult member who also testified in the Michigan case, said Cyrus and another boy were once made to eat a tablespoon of plain cinnamon, which is extremely bitter, after being caught sampling a cinnamon jar at the Branch Davidians' home in La Verne, Calif.

Howell's petulance often led him to whip children, Robyn Bunds said.

She said Howell hit 10-month-old Shaun Bunds with a paddle at Mount Carmel after the baby wouldn't come to him.

"I was shocked," Bunds said. "But I realized he wanted him to love his father. In a normal family, the child knows who his father is. But Vernon was never around to know as a daddy. He shows up and thinks it's time to discipline Shaun because he's spoiled. He's not spoiled. He was scared of Vernon."

Bunds said Shaun Bunds' bottom bled after the whipping.

"You know how soft and sensitive a baby's skin is-" Bunds asked. "His bottom was hit so much that the skin was raw. It's not like a scrape. It's just where the skin is hit so much that it bruises and can't take any more and bleeds."

Lasting effects

She believes the whippings had lasting effects.

At the recommendation of Shaun Bunds' day care center, Bunds has scheduled an appointment for her son to meet with a therapist. Day care teachers report that Shaun Bunds is emotionally underdeveloped, Bunds said. They told Bunds that her son is easily frustrated and cries often.

Bunds blames her son's problems on Howell's inattention and harsh discipline.

Howell, though, claims Bunds whipped Shaun.

"Yeah, I spanked him," Robyn Bunds said. "I'm not proud of it. I want to throw up, to know I let him get to me in that way. I'm sorry I did that. There's no way to take it back. But I was told to. The hardest thing for me of all this is to know I did it, too. All I can say is I was in a certain frame of mind. Vernon said even if a child died from a spanking they would go to heaven. You're thinking from a worldly perspective. You don't think like that in a cult. You can't think that way or you won't survive for one day."

Day by day was how Breault had survived for a long time.

Finding out about Howell and the 13-year-old Australian girl, though, finally pushed him to act. Breault had considered her innocent, not only of sex but of Branch Davidian teachings.

In May 1989, Breault applied to Australian officials for an immigration visa.

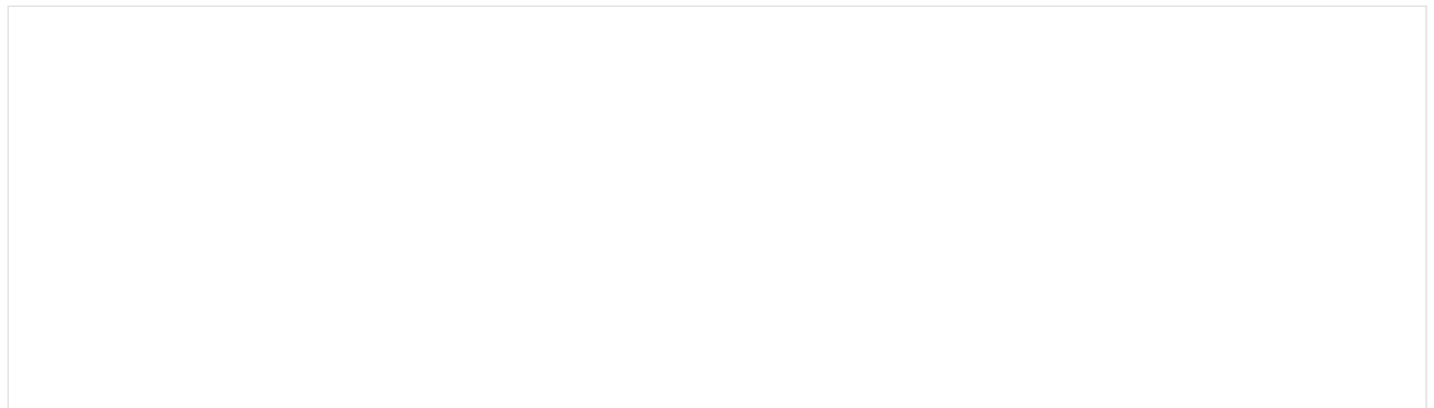
His new bride, Elizabeth Baranyai, a native Australian went on ahead to Melbourne, to earn money to pay Breault's way over.

Breault missed her, but it had to be done.

Thoughts swirled in his head in those days. He didn't really know what he believed any more. But after Breault sat through a Bible study in Pomona on Aug. 5, 1989 and heard Howell's so-called New Light, he knew one thing.

Getting his wife out of the country had been providential.

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