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The Sinful Messiah: Part Six — Some followers start looking for a way out of Howell's control

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

Detective Ron Ingels thought he was back in the '60s when he entered the house at 2707 White Ave. in La Verne, Calif.

Ingels accompanied Robyn Bunds to the two-story white stucco in the summer of 1990. Police had a warrant to search for her young son, Shaun Bunds. Once inside, police found the house set up like a dormitory. One room had a single bed, but all the other rooms had bunk beds.

It reminded Ingels of a commune. Arriving on a Saturday, police had interrupted a Sabbath service. There were men downstairs who had come over from the cult's Pomona house. When police went upstairs, they found about 20 women and one man.

Vernon Howell.

Howell, 33, is the prophet leader of the Branch Davidians, a Waco-based spinoff of the Seventh-day Adventists - which mainline Adventists frankly consider to have rocketed off into orbit.

"He was there by himself with all the women," said Ingels, now the police chief. "And the women indicated that they were dedicated and loyal to Howell and would do anything he said. It was a strange situation. All the men stayed in Pomona. All the women stayed with Howell.

La Verne looks and feels like a village, with large old houses, a town square and a small campus, the University of La Verne, that's straight out of a Norman Rockwell illustration, with the addition of a few palm trees.

La Verne police were well aware of the Branch Davidians, who didn't quite fit in, but considered them harmless.

Until they met Robyn Bunds. She had quite a story to tell them.

"I didn't leave out one dirty detail," she said.

Bunds told police that Howell had upward of 15 so-called wives, or the women in the cult with whom he had sex. And some of the wives were underage, she reported to police, including a 14-year-old Australian girl who had become a "wife" a year earlier. Bunds also had been one of Howell's wives, she said.

She believed Howell had kidnapped her son, Shaun, who was less than 2 years old, and sent him to Mount Carmel, the cult's home base about 10 miles east of Waco.

Howell was the boy's father, Bunds told La Verne police.

The apparent kidnapping came after she had seemingly gotten Howell's blessings to leave the cult, Bunds said.

Howell had pulled her aside a few weeks before at the La Verne house and kissed her. To his surprise, she started crying. He asked her what was wrong. She wanted to leave and try to live a normal life, Bunds told him. Mockingly, Howell asked where she would go. Bunds, then 21 years old, threw out the name of a former boyfriend, one she had not seen or heard from in years. It was the only person she could think of.

An angry Howell stormed away, Bunds said.

The next day, after Bunds got off work as a receptionist for a videotape duplication company, she returned to the La Verne house to find all her belongings gone. This was her chance, she reasoned. Howell was saying, in effect, "See if you can make it on your own."

But Howell meant Bunds to start a new life missing more than her belongings.

Son is gone

Her son, Shaun, or Wisdom as he was called at the time, was also gone. Howell had sent the boy to Texas in the care of Branch Davidian Novellete Sinclair, according to Robyn Bunds and police. Sinclair was one of the women who kept Shaun while his mother worked.

Incensed, Robyn Bunds went to the La Verne Police Department.

Bunds accompanied police to the house on White Avenue. She identified the women she believed to be Howell's wives, including her own mother, Jeannine.

Howell told police what they suspected: Shaun Bunds was not there. He was in Texas.

Sgt. John Hackworth and the other police officers noticed Howell's voice was trembling. He hardly seemed a foreboding figure, a prophet with the might of God behind him. There was a hint of anger, too, in Howell's face. Hackworth thought he knew why. Howell was no longer in control; the police were. His followers saw him reduced to a mere mortal.

Wanting to put a scare into Howell, La Verne police gave him 48 hours to return Shaun Bunds to California or face kidnapping charges. The media would also be alerted, police said.

Before police left, Howell asked to speak to Robyn Bunds.

"Robyn, you know more than these people," Howell implored.

"Shut up," an officer snapped at Howell. "She's being deprogrammed."

Am I that far gone- a stunned Bunds asked herself.

'Like a zombie'

Howell walked around "like a zombie," after police left, Jeannine Bunds said. He couldn't believe that Robyn Bunds had gone to the authorities.

"She stuck a knife in my heart and twisted it," Howell said aloud.

Two days later, Shaun Bunds was back home. Police returned to the La Verne house and asked to see the 14-year-old Australian girl. But she had gone to Texas, along with Howell.

"If they had detained her that first night, this would be all over," Robyn Bunds said.

Ingels said the first priority for La Verne police was getting Shaun Bunds back to his mother, not questioning the Australian girl, although the age of consent in California is 18 years old.

"Before we could really investigate, she disappeared," Ingels said. "He left, too. And he didn't come back . . . I don't think he liked our attention."

Jeannine Bunds left the Branch Davidians a few months after her daughter.

'I did believe'

The New Light, Howell's August 1989 pronouncement that all women belonged to him, had always troubled Robyn Bunds. Her mother knew that. For Jeannine Bunds, like her daughter, became Howell's wife, part of the House of David - the women who were to have the children supposedly destined to rule the world with Howell.

"I wanted to be in the House of David," said Jeannine Bunds. "He made it sound so wonderful. I did. I did believe. I couldn't tell you why now."

Howell prophesied that she would become pregnant, even though she was in her early 50s, Jeannine Bunds said. The thought tantalized her.

"The children in the group are so beautiful, they really are," Jeannine Bunds said. "You think, These must be God's children. They're so beautiful.' "

But Jeannine Bunds didn't get pregnant. She became even more depressed when her daughter left the cult. Howell exacerbated things by forbidding Jeannine Bunds to talk to her daughter.

Heartbroken, Jeannine Bunds quit her job as a nurse at Providence Health Center and left Waco, leaving Howell a good-bye note.

Her parting with Howell wasn't bitter, but bittersweet.

"Even now, I don't hate him," Jeannine Bunds said. "Even after all he's done to my family. It's hard for me. I've seen both sides of him. He can be nice. He cares about people, or at least he seems to . . . I do have feelings for Vernon. Sometimes they overwhelm me. But all my life, this has been my daughter, my baby, my doll."

Robyn Bunds, in contrast to her mother, has no lingering affection for Howell.

"He has totally changed," Bunds said. "He was really nice. He was humble. He was very well-mannered. Over the years, though, he's lost a lot of those qualities. He's become this obnoxious, foul-mouth, pushy person because of the power he has over these people."

Howell, however, sincerely believes what he teaches, Robyn Bunds said.

"Some people I tell this say he's a con man," she said. "Ah, kinda. But he does believe it."

One member of the Bunds family remains at Mount Carmel. Don Bunds chose Howell over his family. His greatest fear is burning in hell, his wife and daughter said. His family rarely hears from him.

A cruel irony

Jeannine Bunds sees a cruel irony in losing her husband to religion. Reared a Catholic, she changed faiths to keep her husband.

"Because of this, I really lost my husband," she said. "So what did I accomplish- I just sit back sometimes and it feels like I've been hit by a bomb. I think I should have done this; I should have done that. But it's too late for me. It's too late for my family. It's been blown to smithereens."

She blames herself for her daughter becoming involved with the Branch Davidians and Howell.

As a teen-ager, Robyn Bunds had fled the cult, going to live with relatives in New Bedford, Mass., but she got lonely and asked to come home to California. Howell, though, ordered Robyn Bunds to go to Palestine, Texas, the cult's home base at the time.

Bunds' parents advised her to obey Howell. They didn't know Howell wanted to seduce their daughter, then 17, Jeannine Bunds said.

"If we had had any inkling . . ." Jeannine Bunds said. "When we did find out, we felt very betrayed. I feel like we did her a dirty deal, even though he was very deceptive about what he did."

For herself, Jeannine Bunds offers no excuse.

'I chose to stay'

"I'm over 21, intelligent," she said. "I could have walked away at any time. I chose to stay. He doesn't keep you. You can leave. What you have to understand, though, is he keeps you by emotion. When you're down there, it's all so exciting. You don't know what he'll come up with next. I guess everyone is looking for Utopia, Shangri la. You don't want any problems. It wasn't all bad times, you know. The people in this are great. They'll give you the shirt off their back. They're nice, like everyone else in the world. Except they believe this."

Jeannine Bunds works two jobs so her daughter can attend Mount San Antonio College, where she is a pre-law major.

They're both trying to start their lives over, but it's impossible for either woman to really forget the past. For one thing, they live in the Pomona house, which Don and Jeannine Bunds bought on Howell's order as a place for the men in the cult to stay while in California. The cult abandoned the house last spring.

But the most telling reminder of the past is Shaun Bunds, now 4, who reminds both Jeannine and Robyn Bunds every day that they once loved the same man.