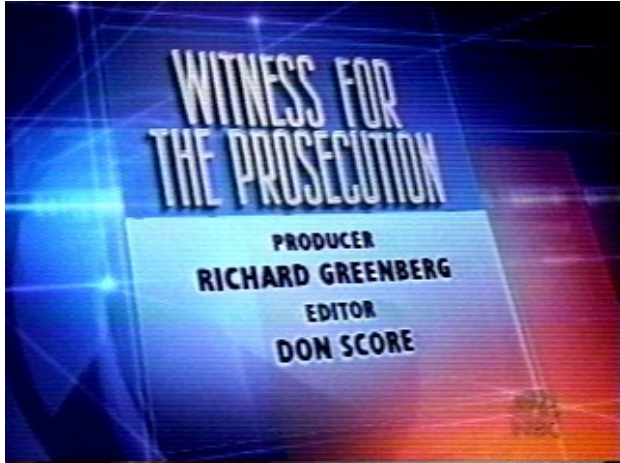


Transcript: Dateline NBC

DATE: May 28, 2002

WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION

- For Spanish translation [click here](#)



Announcer: From our studios in New York , here is Jane Pauley.

JANE PAULEY: Good evening. At some point it may stop being news--each time another person comes forward to say they were sexually abused as a child by a trusted religious figure--but not yet, though tonight it's not priests under fire. In fact, our story began long before the Catholic Church scandal broke last January. The scenario of alleged abuse is much the same, but the consequences of coming forward, for people whose faith was the center of their lives, would be harsh and profound. Here's John Larson.

JOHN LARSON reporting:

In a small town like Othello, Washington, neighbors are often friends, and friends like family. Which makes the story you're about to hear even more painful. Because, for Erica Garza, who grew up here, there was no one closer, no one she trusted more than her parents' best friend.

(Othello; homes; Othello city limit sign; Erica Garza; Manuel Beliz)

Ms. ERICA GARZA: You would have never known by looking at him, or by the way he acted what he was doing on the side.

LARSON: (Voiceover) What that friend, Manuel Beliz, was doing was molesting Erica, sexually abusing her. She says it started when she was just five years old.

(Photo of Beliz; photo of Erica)

Ms. E. GARZA: I remember it just like it was yesterday.

LARSON: What was your reaction when he first started touching you?

Ms. E. GARZA: I didn't know any better.

(Voiceover) I just remember it hurt.

(Photo of Erica)

Ms. E. GARZA: Out of anything, I just remember the hurt.

(From home video) (Unintelligible)...my brother.

LARSON: (Voiceover) A hurt that grew, she says, because her molester pressured her to keep it all a secret. And while that may not be surprising, this isn't a story about a molester trying to stay in the shadows. This is a story about others who may have played a role not only in Erica's abuse, but the abuse of other victims as well.

(Home video; Beliz; shadow; photo of congregation singing; people holding hymnals)

Ms. E. GARZA: They didn't care about what had happened. Everything they did was trying to hide the facts.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Both Erica and her molester were members of the same church, Jehovah's Witnesses.

(Church sign)

(Excerpt shown from Watchtower Society video)

LARSON: (Voiceover) Jehovah's Witnesses are evangelical Christians best-known for going door-to-door handing out Awake! magazine. Jehovah's Witnesses have six million members worldwide, and some controversial rules--no birthdays or Christmas, no blood transfusions, no military service, no saluting the flag--all of which separates them, sometimes even isolates them from mainstream America. In fact, in the world of Jehovah's Witnesses, anyone outside the church--most of you watching tonight--are considered part of Satan's world, a world which, as depicted in the church's literature, will be destroyed by God. True Jehovah's Witnesses, those who closely follow the church's rules, will survive to live forever on a perfect earth.

But now there are accusations that the church, run out of its headquarters in New York, called the Watchtower Society, is covering up cases of child molestation, protecting molesters and keeping secrets that put children at risk. Consider what happened to Erica Garza. By the time she was 16, Erica's family had moved away from Othello to a new home and new Kingdom Hall in California where one day she found the courage to tell her family her terrible secret. And what did her father, Reuben Garza do?

Report it to the police?

(Excerpts from Watchtower Society video; congregation; members of congregation; woman being baptized; boy being baptized; books; artist's drawings; New York City; Watchtower building; photos of Erica and others; Kingdom Hall; photo of Erica and family)

Mr. REUBEN GARZA: No. Never mentioned report it to the police.

(Voiceover) Take care of it in the congregation.

(Kingdom Hall)

LARSON: (Voiceover) Reuben Garza, who was one of the church's lay ministers, or 'elders,' says that's precisely what Jehovah's Witness leaders had taught him. And so instead of going to the police, he and his wife, Alexandra, called the elders back in Othello.

(Photo of Reuben Garza; photo of Garza family)

LARSON: But let me say the obvious. I mean, your daughter's been raped. Didn't you think, 'I've got to go to the cops?'

Ms. ALEXANDRA GARZA: That was my first reaction. But as a Witness, first you've got to go to the elders when you have a problem.

LARSON: (Voiceover) But the elders didn't go to the police, either. Why? Well, legally, they didn't have to. Only 16 states require clergy members to report any and all suspected child abuse, and Washington state is not one of them. Instead, church elders opened their own internal investigation. It's one of the things that sets Jehovah's Witnesses apart from most other religious groups. The church has its own judicial system.

(Kingdom Hall; swings; Othello; Kingdom Hall)

LARSON: Whenever a church member is accused of doing something wrong--whether it's breaking a church rule like smoking, committing a sin like adultery, or even committing a crime like rape--the local church appoints a special committee of elders to investigate the charge. Now, if the accused is found guilty, they can be reprimanded or, in worst cases, kicked out of the church, disfellowshipped, potentially cut off from their friends and family, losing their chance, they believe, at everlasting life. For a Jehovah's Witness, there can be no greater punishment.

(Voiceover) Erica Garza expected her molester would, at the very least, be disfellowshipped. But after five months of waiting for the church in Othello to act, she got angry and did the unthinkable.

Ms. E. GARZA: So I called my elders and I said, 'Look, I'm taking it to the police.'

LARSON: What did they say?

Ms. E. GARZA: 'Don't. Or else.'

LARSON: Or else what?

Ms. E. GARZA: That's what I said. I said, 'Or else what?' And he said, 'Just don't.' I said, 'What? I'll be disfellowshipped if I take it to the police? Is that what's going to happen to me?' And he said, 'Yes. You will be disfellowshipped.' And I was just, like, 'What? You're going to disfellowship me for being raped, yet they guy who raped me is still a Jehovah's Witness?' And they said, 'Don't. Don't take it to the police. You will be condemned by God.'

LARSON: (Voiceover) It was October 1996, and Erica says she finally decided whatever the penalty, she had to go to the police. Following an investigation, Manuel Beliz was charged with molestation and rape.

And the church? Erica says her California Kingdom Hall not only shunned her, but shunned her family as well.

(Erica; Beliz; Kingdom Hall)

LARSON: What happened?

Mr. GARZA: Was removed as an elder.

LARSON: So they kicked you out.

Mr. GARZA: Yes, they did.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Erica felt abused, abandoned by her church and alone. But what she couldn't have known was that it would be four more years before another Jehovah's Witness, this time, an elder 2,000 miles away, would take a special interest in Erica's case. The elder had uncovered evidence, he says, that there were many more victims like Erica within Witness Kingdom Halls. And now he, too, was about to break with the church and go outside into what Witnesses believe is the realm of Satan--the outside world--to expose the church's secrets.

(Erica; Bill Bowen; meeting schedule)

LARSON: You talking to me right now, it's like you're talking to Satan.

Mr. BILL BOWEN: That's correct. I'm attacking God, is what they've said about it.

LARSON: In the view of the church, sitting down with us right now.

Mr. BOWEN: Yes.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Bill Bowen is a candle maker in Kentucky , and a lifelong Jehovah's Witness. It all began, he says, about two years ago when he was filing confidential church records at the local Kingdom Hall and stumbled on this letter. It described an admission dating back to the 1980s, a molestation case that he says the church had swept under the rug.

(Bowen making candles; letter; excerpts from letter)

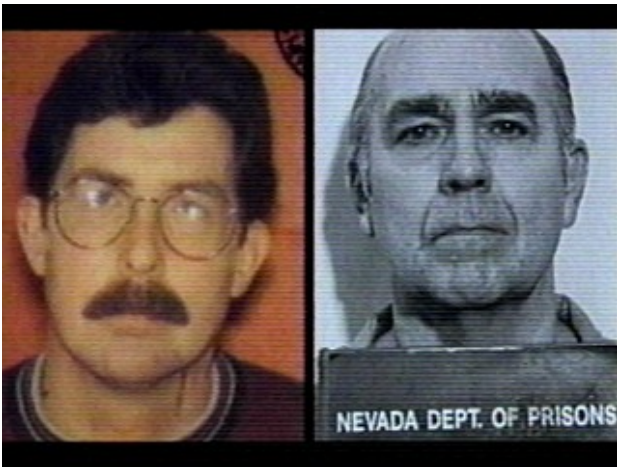
LARSON: About how old was this child that was involved in this case?

Mr. BOWEN: As I reviewed the material, it appeared to me she was about 11 years of age.

LARSON: (Voiceover) And the admitted molester? A man Bowen knew well, a fellow elder who got only a slap on the wrist from the church as was never reported to police. Outraged, Bowen put a message on the Internet to see if there were other similar cases. The response, he says, was an avalanche of pain and frustration.

(Congregation singing; Bowen typing; responses on computer screen)

Mr. BOWEN: These were all Jehovah's Witnesses that had been molested and silenced within the church.



LARSON: (Voiceover) Bill Bowen is not saying Jehovah's Witnesses have more molesters than any other religious group. The problem, he says, is how the church handles the cases that come to its attention. Like the case of Daniel Fitzwater, a Jehovah's Witness elder in Nevada . Bowen discovered that according to the church's own internal records, church officials knew of 17 girls who had accused Fitzwater of molesting them. But police say the church never passed that information on to them.

Bowen also learned that in New Hampshire Paul Berry beat and sexually tortured his step-daughter, Holly Brewer, from the time she was four. But Holly's mother says that when she complained to church elders that Berry was beating Holly and her other kids, the elders told her to be a better wife and to pray more. She also says they never informed police as required by state law. The church denies that, saying she never told them of the abuse. Holly later ran away from home and says she disfigured herself with tattoos and piercings in response to the abuse.

(Watchtower building; photo of Daniel Fitzwater; church records; excerpts from records; photo of Paul Berry; photo of Holly Brewer; photo of family; Kingdom Hall; photo of Holly)

Ms. HOLLY BREWER: It started out by me internalizing the pain. It really did. It started by me, 'I want to mess myself up. I want to make myself look as ugly I can ***(as spoken)***. I don't want any guys to hit on me. I don't want to be attractive to people.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Both Paul Berry in New Hampshire and Daniel Fitzwater in Nevada ultimately were convicted of sexual crimes and are now in prison. But Bill Bowen says many others in the church accused of sexual abuse have never been reported to police. It's a claim he says he's heard, though not verified, from several hundred current and former church members. His conclusion: disturbing to day the least.

(Photos of Berry and Fitzwater; Bowen talking to reporter; text on computer screen)

Mr. BOWEN: It's a pedophile paradise within the organization. I believe that.

LARSON: What's the danger that you've been consumed by this to the point that--that you've blown it all out of proportion? I mean pedophile paradise? Come on.

Mr. BOWEN: I believe it with all my heart.

(Voiceover) There is a massive problem in the organization.

(Bowen)

LARSON: (Voiceover) But Bill Bowen is just one man in one congregation in Kentucky . This woman, Barbara Anderson , worked for a decade inside Jehovah's Witness headquarters. When Anderson saw Bowen's messages on the Internet, she says she realized she had to tell him there was much more to the story, involving children in many of the 11,000 congregations across the country.

(Bowen; Barbara Anderson ; letter on computer screen; Anderson)

Ms. BARBARA ANDERSON: I don't believe that they're safe within their church.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Anderson was a researcher at the Watchtower Society in the early 1990s when a senior official there asked her to look into the church's handling of sexual abuse cases. What she found, she says, sickened her: hundreds of molestation cases on record, all kept secret in church files--secret not only from the outside world, but from the members themselves, the families, the mothers and fathers and children who trust the church is looking out for them.

(Watchtower building; Anderson ; filing cabinets)

Ms. ANDERSON: I believe that if they asked to see the congregation records, they will find that there are many envelopes with letters that discuss men-or women--in the congregation that were accused of molesting a child.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Why would the church want to keep these cases secret and in-house? Anderson agrees that part of the problem is the church's distrust of the outside world, but she says it's not that simple. Anderson says when church elders investigate crimes like child molestation, they follow instructions that may prevent them from taking action--ancient instructions taken from the Bible itself.

(Watchtower building; Bible)

Ms. ANDERSON: They basically use a scripture in I Timothy 5:19 that states you're not to make an accusation against an older man unless there are two or three witnesses.

LARSON: What are the odds that there are going to be two or three witnesses to an older man molesting a eight-year-old girl?

Ms. ANDERSON: No molester is going to have any witnesses, that's for sure.

Mr. BOWEN: The sum and total of their investigation will be going to a pedophile and saying, 'Did you do it? Nope? Well, OK. Guess we'd better go on then. Sorry we bothered you.'

(Talking on phone) Did he ask you any questions ?

LARSON: (Voiceover) Bill Bowen says if you want to get an idea of how the church sweeps cases under the rug...

(Bowen talking on phone; traffic on bridges)

Headquarters #1: (On phone) Good afternoon, Watchtower.

LARSON: (Voiceover) ...just listen to part of a conversation Bowen recorded a little over a year ago with an official in the Jehovah's Witness legal department.

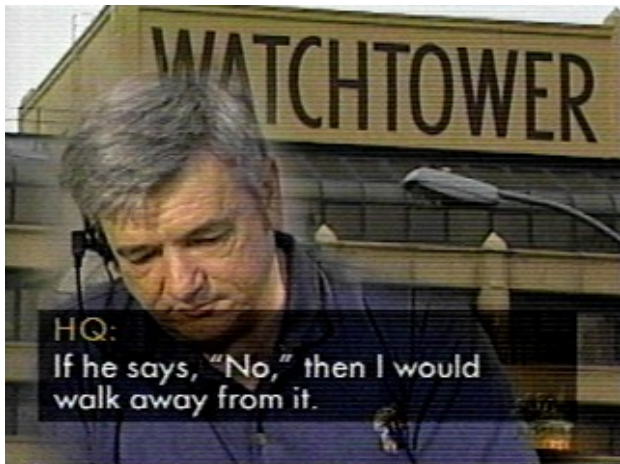
(New York City)

Headquarters Receptionist: (On phone) Good afternoon, Legal Department.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Bowen calls seeking advice on how to handle a suspected molestation case involving a young girl and her father. Instead of being told to report it to the police, Bowen is told to confront the suspected ab user .

(New York City ; Bowen talking on phone)

Headquarters #2: (On phone) You just ask him again, 'Now is there anything to this?' If he says 'No,' then I would walk away from it.



Mr. BOWEN: (On phone) Yep.

Headquarters #2: (On phone) Leave it for Jehovah. He'll bring it out.

Mr. BOWEN: (On phone) Yep.

Headquarters #2: (On phone) But don't get yourself in a jam.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Again, there was no insistence that this matter be brought to the authorities in the outside world. Bowen says he was so upset by the whole case he resigned as a church elder and vowed to help abuse victims. He didn't know that halfway across the country, Erica Garza as feeling the same frustration as she prepared to face her molester in court.

(Bowen and woman; Erica and family)

LARSON: Did any of those elders, any of the people in the church stand up and speak on your behalf?

Ms. E. GARZA: No.

LARSON: (Voiceover) But Erica Garza was about to find out that she wasn't really all alone.

(Announcements)

Announcer: DATELINE NBC, winner of 10 Headliner awards for excellence in journalism. America 's most watched, most honored news magazine, DATELINE, will be right back.

(Announcements)

Announcer: From our studios in Rockefeller Center , here is Stone Phillips.

STONE PHILLIPS: She was just five years old when she says she was first molested by a respected member of her Jehovah's Witnesses congregation. Now a young woman, Erica Garza wants justice. She says church leaders threatened to expel her if she went to the police, but she went anyway and now her alleged attacker is on trial for molestation and rape. Here with the conclusion to our story, John Larson.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Erica Garza's accused molester, Manuel Beliz, showed up in court with plenty of support.

(Courthouse; empty court room)

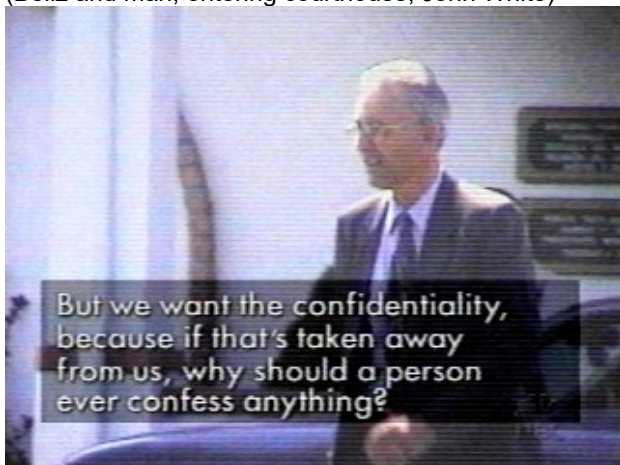
Ms. GARZA: (Voiceover) His side was full of Jehovah's Witnesses.

(Empty court room)

Ms. GARZA: People I thought were my friends, but they were there to support him. And on my side was my family.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Even though Beliz had apparently confessed his crimes before church elders, it appeared to make little difference. He was expelled from the church, but only temporarily. Elders allowed him to rejoin the church before the trial. John White, the congregation's top elder, explained at a court hearing.

(Beliz and man; entering courthouse; John White)



Mr. JOHN WHITE: (From audio tape) We're satisfied that he was repentant and could be admitted to the congregation again. To us, we don't see a problem.

LARSON: (Voiceover) White also told the court that when a church member is called before the elders and admits to a crime, they consider it a religious confession and that, just like a priest or rabbi, he and other elders have good reason not to testify about it in court.

(Empty court room)

Mr. WHITE: (From audio tape) Jehovah's Witnesses do not want to harbor criminals or dangerous people. But we want the confidentiality because if that's taken away from us, why should a person ever confess anything?

LARSON: Did anybody say, 'We understand the pain that this girl has gone through?'

Ms. E. GARZA: They say we--they feel sorry for me.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Even without the church's help or the testimony of elders who, Erica says, knew what had happened, in August of 1998 Manuel Beliz was convicted, guilty on two counts of rape and two counts of child molestation. He was sentenced to 11 1/2 years in prison, but two years into his term, his conviction was overturned on a technicality over how the jury had been selected. Erica had stood up, faced her ab user, even challenged her church, but now he was being let out of prison.

(Kingdom Hall; photo of Beliz; jail; empty court room; Erica)

Ms. E. GARZA: I was so disappointed, I was sad, I was heartbroken and I didn't know what to do.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Manuel Beliz was released from prison to await a new trial. Last summer DATELINE found him back at the Kingdom Hall, about to join others going door-to-door, evangelizing for the church.

(Beliz)

Ms. E. GARZA: It just makes me so sad because I was raped and I was--I'm being shunned, and he raped me and--and he's being loved. It just--it--it gives me chills up my spine just to think about it.

LARSON: (Voiceover) How do Jehovah's Witness leaders respond to complaints that they're trying to bury cases like Erica's? They declined a request for an on-camera interview, but spoke to us off camera, and provided us with a videotaped policy statement by spokesman J. R. Brown.

(Watchtower building; excerpt from videotape)

Mr. J. R. BROWN: (From videotape) Jehovah's Witnesses feel child abuse is an evil. It's an evil of our time, it's an evil in our society and so we abhor it.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Church officials say they publish articles like this, educating members and training elders how to help abuse victims. The church also says elders are required to investigate any allegations of abuse, and steps are taken to protect alleged victims from further abuse. And while officials acknowledge that molesters who repent are readmitted to church, they say known molesters are not allowed to hold a position of responsibility within the church. They also insist that the church complies with all laws on reporting abuse in those states where it's required, even when there's only one witness to the crimes. But in states where churches are not required to report, they say they do not discourage victims from reporting abuse to authorities.

(Magazine articles; church name on building; congregation singing)

Mr. BROWN: (From videotape) When it comes to the matter of reporting, then that's something the parents can decide. We certainly never tell them not to report a case of child molestation.

LARSON: (Voiceover) In a letter to DATELINE, the church's general council adds that "it is possible that a few of the 77,799 elders of Jehovah's Witnesses have not followed the direction that they have been given regarding investigating and reporting child abuse."

(Letters; excerpts from letters)

LARSON: What remains unanswered, though, is why the church gets involved at all with investigating what are criminal matters. And just how often do they turn one of their own into authorities? We asked the church for some examples, proof that they're as tough as they say they are on members who abuse children. The church waited six months, but finally offered us two cases. And right away we noticed something. In both cases, the victims were Jehovah's Witnesses, but their alleged molesters were not. They were non-believers from outside the church.

(Voiceover) In fact, we could only find two cases where the church took an active role in turning in one of its own, including the case of this man, Clement Pandello.

(Clement Pandello)

Offscreen Voice: Mr. Pandello...



LARSON: (Voiceover) Pandello, seen here in family videos...

(Excerpts from family videos)

Unidentified Girl: (From home video) ...in the middle.

LARSON: (Voiceover) ...confessed to church elders he'd molested his own granddaughter.

(Excerpts from family videos)

Mr. CLEMENT PANDELLO: (From video) Have to kick you out of school if they put one in your head.

LARSON: (Voiceover) How did the church handle it? The parents of the young victim, Pandello's own son and daughter-in-law, also Jehovah's Witnesses, told DATELINE the church pressured to agree to a deal in which Pandello pled guilty to criminal sexual contact and endangering the welfare of a child. He was given only probation, no jail time. And what did the church elders tell Barbara and Carl Pandello?

(Excerpts from family videos; Carl and Barbara Pandello walking on beach; excerpts from family video)

Mr. CARL PANDELLO: We should just let it go, that it's not Jehovah's time to deal with it.

LARSON: (Voiceover) The church says that's not true, and the church apparently did disfellowship Clement Pandello two separate times. But each time they welcomed him back. So where is this convicted child molester today, a man who, according to court records, has admitted molesting girls all his life? DATELINE found him going door-to-door, a Jehovah's Witness in good standing, evangelizing to people who know nothing about his record. His own son, Carl, says the church should know better.

(Clement)

Mr. CARL PANDELLO: He's a sexual predator. When he goes door-to-door, he has a craving for young, juvenile girls, as he puts it. He's looking at that child, having those immoral thoughts in his mind while he's there.

LARSON: You know the church now says they don't have a special problem. It's a societal problem and they do everything they can to stop pedophiles from hurting children within the Jehovah's Witness church. What do you say to them?

Ms. E. GARZA: Liars.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Even though her accused rapist had been freed on a technicality, Erica Garza was not about to let him off the hook. Last summer, nearly five years after she first came forward, Erica headed back to court. Once again, not one Jehovah's Witness from her former church came to support her. But this time, she wasn't alone.

(Beliz; Erica and others)

Mr. BOWEN: ...comments we've made from all over the country...

LARSON: (Voiceover) That out-spoken elder from Kentucky, Bill Bowen, was there.

(Erica talking to Bowen)

Mr. BOWEN: Just to even things.

LARSON: (Voiceover) And Bowen had set up a new support group for sexually abused Jehovah's Witnesses. And more than 20 people who had heard about the case through his Web site were there to support Erica.

Ms. GARZA: Thank you, everybody, for being here.

These are people who don't know me, who flew from all over the place for me, to be there for me because they realize, 'Hey, you didn't do anything wrong.' And it was so encouraging to see people there for me...

(Voiceover) ...as opposed for him.

(People entering court house)

LARSON: (Voiceover) In court, Manuel Beliz took the stand. He denied molesting Erica, but did admit touching her inappropriately. Once again, Beliz was found guilty.

(Empty court room; photo of Beliz)

Ms. E. GARZA: Guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Erica Garza says she has found justice in spite of her church.

(Erica, Reuben and Alexandra coming out of courthouse)

Ms. E. GARZA: Oh, I can't believe it. On all four counts.

Mr. GARZA: Just a little bit of justice. You deserve it.

Ms. E. GARZA: Thank you, God. Thank you, Lord.

LARSON: (Voiceover) Her molester has been sent to prison for 11 1/2 years.

Ms. E. GARZA: Thank you for all your help, Bill.

Mr. BOWEN: Everything's over.

Ms. ANDERSON: You'll sleep well tonight, won't you?

Ms. E. GARZA: Yeah.

LARSON: (Voiceover) All Erica wants now, she says, is for the church to change its policy and give molestation victims simple advice.

Ms. E. GARZA: 'Take it to the police.' Hey, encourage me to take it to the police. Don't tell me not to.

PHILLIPS: Erica Garza and Holly Brewer are both suing the Watchtower Society and their local congregations. The church is fighting the lawsuits. The church also told DATELINE that while some known pedophiles still go door-to-door, they are not allowed to do alone.

Finally, four of the people DATELINE interviewed--former Elder Bill Bowen, Barbara Anderson and Carl and Barbara Pandello--are facing possible expulsion from their congregations.