



- Complaints of molestations to leaders of Jehovah's Kingdom Hall in Linda Vista accomplished nothing, according to court documents.
- *Image by Matthew Suárez*
- CITY LIGHTS

## Judge orders Jehovah's Witnesses to release molestation files

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### Eighteen years of horror in Linda Vista

By Dorian Hargrove, Aug. 30, 2017

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The mission of Jehovah's Witnesses is to spread belief in the Bible in hopes of rescuing folks before the world ends.

Jehovah's Witnesses' attorneys seem to have another mission: do anything to keep internal documents revealing the names of alleged child molesters, and the congregations they attended, from seeing the light of day.



“I can’t explain what their logic is or their legal strategy,” says attorney Irwin Zalkin.

IMAGE BY MATTHEW SUÁREZ

The second directive is unfolding in two San Diego courtrooms. Attorneys for José Lopez and Osbaldo Padron — both alleged victims of molestation by an elder from the Linda Vista congregation named Gonzalo Campos — say Jehovah’s Witnesses’ governing body, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, refuses to turn over documents. This is despite the fact that two San Diego County Superior Court judges [have imposed millions](#) of dollars in sanctions for similar conduct.

In a June 17, 2017, email, Lopez’s attorney Devin Storey accuses the Watchtower of withholding documents that his client needs to “establish Watchtower’s practice of protecting molesters from prosecution.”

The struggle for documents is not isolated to San Diego courtrooms but is playing out in several countries. Watchtower’s policies of requiring more than one eyewitness to the abuse before launching an investigation; of forcing the abused, often young children, to confront their abuser; and of prohibiting members from contacting law enforcement with complaints of sexual abuse have created what one former member and outspoken critic of the Watchtower Tract Society, William Bowen, calls a “pedophile’s paradise.”

Last year, a Royal Commission in Australia found that Jehovah’s Witnesses had hidden more than a thousand reports of child abuse from that country’s law enforcement. In the United States, during the past five years, the Watchtower has paid out numerous settlements to people who claimed they’d suffered child abuse at the hands of church elders. To date, seven San Diego residents have sued the Watchtower Tract Society regarding sexual abuse of minors.

## Watchtower resistance

In 2015, Superior Court judge Joan Lewis awarded Lopez \$13.5 million after Watchtower repeatedly failed to turn over documents and provide access to witnesses. The Watchtower appealed the decision. A state appellate court ruled that the judge did not give the Watchtower enough opportunity to turn over the documents. Appellate court judges remanded the case back to the trial court, providing the church another chance to turn over the requested documents.

In a separate case, but one following a similar pattern, San Diego Superior Court judge Richard Strauss [imposed a \\$4000-per-day penalty](#) against the Watchtower for failing to turn over documents in a case filed by Padron, another one of Campos's alleged victims. Watchtower's attorneys, as they did in the Lopez case, filed an appeal.

Attorney Storey from the Zalkin Law Firm, says the Watchtower is back to its old tricks in the Lopez case, once again producing heavily redacted documents and failing to produce others despite orders from a court-appointed mediator. Meanwhile, Storey and lead attorney Irwin Zalkin are preparing for yet another appellate court hearing wherein the Watchtower hopes to nullify the \$4000-a-day fine given in the Padron case.

## Fled to Mexico

Gonzalo Campos, 54, became a Jehovah's Witness in 1979 after moving to San Diego from Mexico. He was baptized in 1980 while attending the congregation in Linda Vista. Six months following his baptism, church elders promoted Campos to "publisher," a member who visits homes with hopes of spreading church doctrine, also the first step in becoming an elder.

But according to accusations against him, Campos and his mother were staying at a member family's home in 1982. Campos shared a bedroom with a young boy. In the middle of the night, the boy felt somebody pulling down his pajama pants and felt wetness on his buttocks. He opened his eyes and Campos was kneeling next to his bed. The boy punched Campos and then grabbed a baseball bat. The boy's mother kicked Campos and his mother out of her house. Days later she lodged a complaint with church elders Justino Diaz and Carlos Ramirez at the Linda Vista congregation. The elders did not

punish Campos. Instead he remained a publisher and was allowed to teach Bible classes to children.

It was not the last time Campos is alleged to have sexually assaulted a child and received protection from church elders. Eight now claim that Campos molested them. The alleged molestations happened between 1982 and 1999. Elders have been accused of refusing to report the molestation to law enforcement.

During those nearly two decades, Campos is said to have meticulously groomed his victims and their parents. Accusers say he convinced parents to let their children accompany him on gardening jobs, ostensibly as a chance for the children to learn hard work and receive instruction on church dogma.

Once at the job site, accusers say, Campos would often let the kids swim in his clients' pools. Once the work was done and the kids finished swimming, Campos would force the kids into the shower. While showering Campos would touch them and eventually sodomize them.

In exchange for their silence, several witnesses have testified, Campos would buy them Hershey's chocolate bars, McDonald's Happy Meals, and toys such as Transformers and Matchbox cars. In one case, the alleged victim says Campos repeatedly assaulted him over a five-year span and paid him money to keep quiet.

All the while, church leaders at the Linda Vista congregation continued to promote Campos, eventually to the position of elder, a person responsible for arranging and speaking at meetings.

By 1993, parents began to discover what had happened to their children. One mother found out after finding a note her teenage son had written to a girlfriend. She contacted the elders at the Linda Vista congregation to report Campos.

Days later, elder Roberto Rivera called the mother back. “But he say something to the fact that [Campos] was an elder now and not to do anything,” testified the woman during a December 2013 deposition. “That if I will speak or keep moving things around to find out stuff, that they will say something that I did in the past.”

Rivera’s response was not unusual. Since the late 1970s, according to senior Watchtower official Allen Shuster, who provided testimony in March 2012, church policy required two elders to meet with the accused molester to see if he or she was willing to admit guilt. If the accused denied guilt, in search of what they considered credible evidence, elders needed a witness to the abuse. If no such witness came forward, they would dismiss the allegation. And even if the accused molester admitted to the act, Watchtower’s policy was to keep the incident confidential and not report it to law enforcement. If a witness was present and the accused admitted guilt, the body of elders would expel the person from the church.

But new complaints about Campos continued to surface. In 1995, church elders expelled him from the congregation.

The expulsion, however, was not permanent.

In December 1999, Linda Vista elder Eduardo Chavez contacted Watchtower headquarters informing them of Campos’s abuse and that they were ready to accept him back into the congregation.

“In our meeting with him he said he was very repentant for what he did,” Chavez wrote to Watchtower headquarters in New York. “He stated that he wanted to return to Jehovah. He is willing to face the victims and ask their forgiveness. He now wants to obey Jehovah. Before, when he would speak to people on the platform he would not meditate on what he was doing. Although he needed to confess, he felt shameful and had fear of mankind. He would deceive himself thinking that he could continue serving as an elder. Now he realized that he could not change without help. Ever since his expulsion he has not abused anyone. He has read articles of the publications

regarding his sin. He says he does not see or read pornographic information. He stated that ever since expulsion he has worked on having a relationship with Jehovah and the expulsion has served to strengthen him spiritually. He does not miss meetings, and he even takes notes of the program. He also said that he is willing to continue accepting Jehovah's discipline."

Elders welcomed Campos back into the congregation in 2000.

In 2006, according to a letter the *Reader* has obtained, elders were considering promoting Campos to conduct field service. The elders at Linda Vista, however, ultimately decided against the promotion. Reads the letter, "Due to the fact that victims and mothers of victims are still grieving this abuse, we have decided as a body at this time to allow for more time to pass by until we consider [Campos] for minor privileges in the congregation." Then, in 2009, five of his accusers learned of Campos's return. They hired attorney Irwin Zalkin. Campos fled to Mexico shortly thereafter. In September 2011 he appeared in Tijuana to testify under oath in a 2010 civil suit brought by five of his victims. During his testimony, Campos admitted to touching and in many cases anally penetrating the boys on numerous occasions. The following is an excerpt between attorney Devin Storey and Campos:

- "I touched him in his private parts," Campos testified.
- Attorney Storey: " Did you touch his penis?"
- Campos: Yes.
- Storey: "Did you penetrate him?"
- Campos: "Yes. Yes."
- Storey: "How many times?"
- Campos: "More than once. I don't know."

Campos then admitted to molesting the other children as well.

In 2012, the Watchtower settled the case brought by Campos's five victims for an undisclosed amount. Later that year José Lopez, followed by Osbaldo Padron, also filed suits. But unlike in previous cases, Watchtower attorneys seem unwilling to enter into similar settlement talks.

“I can’t explain what their logic is or their legal strategy,” said lead attorney Zalkin during an August 14 phone interview. “The fact that they once again appear willing to reargue the same issues and fight releasing documents that judges have ordered them to turn over is beyond me. All we can do is wait for the hearings and let this play out in the courtroom.”

Barbara Anderson, a former Witness who worked at Watchtower’s headquarters, left the church when she discovered reports that the church tried to hide allegations of sex abuse by elders and high-ranking officials. Anderson runs the website [Watchtower Documents](#).

“In the past, to protect the religion’s reputation, rather than protect children, by not adopting a policy or rule for all Jehovah’s Witnesses to report all allegations of child abuse to the authorities, they endangered the welfare of children.”

But Anderson says the church is implementing change. “In view of the public notoriety and scrutiny of this issue, Jehovah’s Witnesses have asserted that they have in place excellent child protection policies without admitting that they endangered the welfare of children because of their religious viewpoint.

“Of course, no matter what regulations are adopted, there never will be a 100 percent guarantee that molestation of a Witness child by a Jehovah’s Witnesses molester will not happen. However, reporting a molester to the police will help to prevent a second or third child from being molested.”

Attorney Zalkin and Watchtower’s attorneys will appear on September 15 at a hearing to discuss a motion from the Watchtower to seal documents from the public. Zalkin says the appellate court should hear the appeal of the \$4000-a-day sanctions sometime next year.