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NEWS

Orange County lawsuit alleges sex abuse by Jehovah's Witness leader

Two men said they were abused in Laguna Hills as teenagers.

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BY ERIC HARTLEY / STAFF WRITER

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Two men who say they were molested as teenagers by a Jehovah's Witness church leader in south Orange County filed a lawsuit against him and the church this week.

The lawsuit says the men were abused in middle school and high school in the 1990s, but "did not begin to discover the causal relationship between the molestation and adulthood psychological injuries until after news broke in September of 2011 regarding the rampant sexual abuse of children by Jerry Sandusky at Penn State University."

Their complaint, filed Monday in Orange County Superior Court, seeks unspecified damages from the local and national church organizations and from the man accused of carrying out the abuse. It alleges sexual battery and negligence.

Local Jehovah's Witness officials could not immediately be reached Wednesday, and the church's main legal and public information offices in New York didn't respond to requests for comment.

The accusers – identified as "John Roe 1 and John Roe 2" – are represented by Irvine and San Diego law firms that specialize in sexual abuse cases.

"Any time you file a lawsuit, they understand that the allegations are going to be a matter of public record," said Irwin Zalkin, one of their attorneys. "They've chosen that route to bring attention and awareness to what is a substantial problem in this organization."

Both accusers, who still live in Orange County, also are seeking compensation to pay for treatment to deal with the psychological effects of the abuse, Zalkin said. He said the abuse happened in or near Laguna Hills.

The man accused of the abuse is identified as "Doe 3" or "Perpetrator." Zalkin said California law bars naming defendants in initial complaints in such cases but that the man's identity will likely become public later.



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He is identified as a baptized "publisher," ministerial servant and "pioneer" within the church.

All baptized Jehovah's Witnesses are ordained ministers, the church website says.

The accusers were recruited to the church as boys by Jehovah's Witnesses knocking on doors, the lawsuit says. Neither of their families was involved with the church.

The lawsuit gives the following account of the abuse:

Doe 3 was assigned to give private Bible lessons to John Roe 1 and met John Roe 2 when the two were assigned to do "field service" for the church in the same group.

Doe 3 took both boys to dinner separately. He also brought the boys to his house at different times, gave each one mixed drinks, undressed in front of them, showered with them and touched them sexually.

John Roe 1, now 29, says he was abused from the sixth to ninth grades. John Roe 2, now 31, says he was abused from the eighth to 11th grades. After Doe 3 was caught in bed with a married man, the lawsuit says, John Roe 2 reported the abuse he'd suffered.

"John Roe 2 told the Elders he wanted to call the police, but the Elders discouraged this and insisted on handling the matter 'in house,'" the complaint says.

After a church "judicial committee" heard the case, the lawsuit says, Doe 3 was disfellowshipped, a move similar to excommunication in some faiths, but the police were never told.

Contact the writer: 949-229-5950 or ehartley@ocregister.com

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