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The Jewish Report Editorial

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Newsletter



The South African Jewish community is confronting what looks like the first case of a high profile businessman - once revered by many - heading down an inescapable path to being charged for sexual abuse.

by VANESSA VALKIN | Jun 24, 2015

Seven victims have come forward and intend suing Sidney Frankel for the harm they say they suffered. Although it is a civil case right now, because criminal prosecution requires the assault to have occurred in the last 20 years, and this group were alleged to have been victims before then, the claimants and their lawyers believe they will find individuals who were abused after them to allow Frankel to be criminally tried.

They believe many more children, who are now adults, were sexually assaulted by him, but have been too terrified or ashamed to speak out. That this is the tip of the iceberg is not hard to believe.

Frankel was a patron of Arcadia Children’s Home and he would take children away to his homes on the weekend. One of the seven claimants was a resident of Arcadia at the time of his alleged abuse.

A social worker who had been employed at Arcadia at the time of the alleged molestations, came forward recently to Arcadia’s current management and told them that when staff got wind of the “irregularities” around Frankel’s behaviour, his contact with the children was cut off.

In a recorded interview with Eyewitness News, George Rosenberg, one of the seven, who resides in the US today, amidst tears, asks how all the adults at the time who were aware, could have let this happen and not acted upon it.

It was probably a mix of reasons.

One is lack of evidence. In the years when I was growing up, and rumours started to surface in Jewish business circles about Frankel, no-one seemed to be sure. Frankel, almost like Michael Jackson, loved having children around him. He would invite the sporty ones to play tennis at his home or to come swim at his pool.

Many of these children he did not touch. Based on the charges laid so far, it seemed to be the more vulnerable ones or ones whose parents may have left them in Frankel's charge for too long who were subject to his alleged abuse.

Another was that there were stories that Frankel had been in therapy to deal with his paedophile tendencies so people were hopeful. Also, in the eighties, when a lot of the alleged incidents occurred, our community and legal institutions were not sufficiently equipped to handle it.

And so, in answer to Rosenberg's question that was so painful to listen to, one can only offer that - the fact that no-one in his circle could show hard evidence, the fact that people were assuaged by his supposed therapies, and that society was so ill-equipped to deal with it, Frankel was never charged.

Growing up with both George Rosenberg and another claimant, Paul Diamond, my girlfriends and I remember them as super cool, "Highlands boys around town" - charismatic, intelligent, handsome and natural leaders. We had no idea of how they had suffered.

Despite their successful adult lives, they live with many emotional scars today as a result of their abuse.

We as a community will watch as this unfolds in the press and the courts in all its sickening reality. But we cannot sit idly by: hopefully these shockwaves will create the welcome alert we need.

Yes, a lot has changed since the eighties: the Jewish institutions under the auspices of the Chevrah Kadisha, including Selwyn Segal and Arcadia Children's Home, now have board members, staff and volunteers fingerprinted for police clearance and their names are checked against the National Sexual Offenders Register. Many of our Jewish day schools screen their staff too though these measure were only introduced in very recent years.

But there is a lot more work to be done to create effective protection mechanisms for our vulnerable members. Child sexual abuse is an epidemic in our country where more than half of our youth are impoverished and seldom under adult supervision.

Even in relatively privileged communities, there is much to do. We need to educate and empower our children to speak out when they feel vulnerable and before they are harmed; and for those who we fail to protect, we owe them the best possible services and networks to deal with all the pain and distress that sexual violation brings.



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