

Children were betrayed by system in Cornwall

St. Thomas Times Journal

17 December 2009

Posted By Christina Blizzard

The good news is there's no pedophile ring in Cornwall.

No satanic rituals. No clandestine group of movers and shakers using their power within the community to hush-up victims who dared to cry rape.

The bad news? It cost \$53 million and took four years for a public inquiry to find that out.

But what the report released yesterday did highlight is that young people who were -- and are -- victimized by sexual predators, are often disbelieved, belittled and ignored by the justice system and those who are supposed to protect them.

In the end, that's more shocking than any organized pedophile ring.

This was, in reality, a disorganized ring of inappropriate actions, random abuse and stupidity.

For the victims, though, the outcome was just as painful as an organized conspiracy.

The very people we expect to uphold the law and to protect our children -- probation officers, priests, police, children's aid workers, teachers -- were either among those who perpetrated the abuse, or looked the other way. In some cases, the investigations were flawed or downright shoddy.

The costly inquiry was a 2003 election campaign promise made by Premier Dalton McGuinty, after persistent pedophile ring allegations kept surfacing in southeastern Ontario.

That's why the government was trying to put forward its best face on the report yesterday.

The exhaustive, 2,000-page study is complex and at times hard to follow.

Advertisement

But Commissioner Mr. Justice Normand Glaude's report contains disturbing tales -- such as this one about two friends, Richard Hickerson and James Lewis.

Hickerson committed suicide eight days after he was questioned by OPP in June, 1998.

An investigating officer found, "a large quantity of homosexual ponographic material in Mr. Hickerson's home, including 85 videotapes, seven of which were home-made videos featuring Mr. Hickerson and Mr. Lewis engaging in sex," says the report.

Officers also found a grocery bag full of cut-up gay porn in Lewis's home. They pieced the photographs together and found they depicted young boys in sexual positions. Police estimated the ages of the boys as between 7 and 18.

Cops told Lewis he would be charged with possession of child pornography.

"Although during their interview on July 10, 1998, Mr. Lewis mentioned to (a police officer) that children are sexual beings and are capable of consenting acts, the officer did not ask Mr. Lewis if he was having sex with children."

Had the Cornwall Police Service further investigated Lewis, the report says, they would "probably have learned," he had been sexually abusing young people.

That's what is so shocking about this report. There was institutional incompetence. In this case, it happened in Cornwall, but it could have happened in any community in Ontario.

Attorney-General Chris Bentley and Public Safety Minister Rich Bartolucci were quick to emphasize, "we've moved on," from that kind of lack of care and concern for our children. Let's hope.

It was Bartolucci, a former teacher, who talked most passionately about the findings. He spoke from the heart about coming to this subject, "maybe from too personal a perspective," as someone who's worked with abused kids.

"I can tell you categorically that any recommendations that are made and acted upon, any changes that will take place because of this report, because of Justice Glaude's recommendations, are (of) value for the people who are victims of that abuse," he said.

But if the people we paid to be guardians of our most fragile children -- those in the care of children's aid, those on the fringes of society -- had been more vigilant, we wouldn't have needed this \$53 million report in the first place.

CHRISTINA.BLIZZARD@SUNMEDIA.CA

Article ID# 2226279