

Therapist's Conduct Draws Fire

Sex-Attack Victim Backed By Board

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By Jodie Snyder

At one point during her therapy to recover from a sexual assault, Kristan Larson remembers sitting in front of her therapist, with one of her socks turned inside out.

That sock, counselor Alfred Ells told her, was God telling him she had the spirit of death in her, making her likely to commit suicide, Larson said.

What started out as treatment for the trauma of a sexual assault turned out to be nine months of assault on her soul, said Larson, 33, of the Phoenix area. She said she was almost made to believe that her father had sexually abused her, that her church performed satanic rituals and that she was possessed by demons.

An investigation by the Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners supports her story.

After a four-day hearing, Hearing Officer Nicholas Guttilla last week ruled that Ells' actions constituted "unprofessional conduct." The board is scheduled to rule on Ells' case April 5 and could offer anything from a letter of censure to revocation of his state license, said David Oake, executive director of the board.

"Mr. Ells was following the counselor's agenda, not the client's agenda," Guttilla said in his findings.

Ells disagrees with the report, saying it contains several factual inaccuracies. He declined to specify them because of a lawsuit Larson has filed.

In a written response to the report, Ells' attorney, Alfred Ricciardi, stated that there was no evidence that Larson ever objected to Ells' treatment methods, such as prayer. Ricciardi denied that Ells used coercive techniques, and he said the state ignored testimony on Ells' behalf.

This is not the first time Ells, director of House of Hope Inc. in Scottsdale, a counseling center, has faced fiery recriminations from former patients and their family members over his treatment methods.

Ells, who has been practicing Christian-based therapy for 20 years, already is on a one-year probation from the state board after relatives of five patients complained of his treatments. They said therapists working under him at House of Hope, then called Samaritan Counseling Services -- which isn't tied to Samaritan Health Systems -- had convinced the five patients wrongly that they had been abused as children.

Facing Lawsuits

In addition to the lawsuit filed by Larson, he faces a similar suit by an Illinois woman who sought treatment for bulimia from him at her pastor's urging. Instead, she said, Ells told her she was possessed by devils.

The hearing officer found that despite raising objections, Larson became entangled in treatment that used prayers and speaking in tongues, and she allowed her employers and employees to sit in on sessions.

Larson, a certified counselor, worked from 1990 to 1994 at Remuda Ranch, a treatment center in Wickenburg that uses Christian philosophy to treat eating disorders.

At the time, the ranch was owned by Ward and Kay Keller, whom the hearing officer described as Ells' close friends. The Kellers and Ells referred patients to each other.

When Larson, a Mormon, started working at Remuda Ranch, she was singled out for her beliefs. She said the Kellers told her that Mormons practiced satanic rituals in the temple and were going to hell, and the Kellers tried to persuade her to become a born-again Christian.

Ward Keller denies that he and his wife tried to change Larson's beliefs, describing Larson as a "terminated, disgruntled employee."

He said he did not want to discuss specifics of the case because of the pending lawsuit, which includes Remuda Ranch.

Less than a year after she started at Remuda Ranch, Larson was sexually assaulted by an acquaintance on a Labor Day trip to California.

When the Kellers found out about the rape, they asked her to write out details of the assault, which they read out loud to each other in front of her and gave to her supervisor, she said. The Kellers also told her to tell her Bible-study class at Remuda Ranch about the rape, she said.

The Kellers told her they thought the confession was good for her soul, Larson said, but "it was beyond uncomfortable."

"It was humiliating and degrading," she said.

Her employers insisted that she get help from Ells, who visited the ranch regularly to perform counseling sessions, she said. Keller denies pressuring her to see Ells, saying she could have gone to other counselors.

Her first session started in May, nine months after the rape. Ells' case notes show that instead of post-trauma disorder, his primary diagnosis of Larson was a problem with "family of origin," or how she was reared.

During the session, Larson said, she stated she never was abused as a child. Yet, in later sessions, Ells persisted in the theory, asking her whether she had ever seen her father naked, she said. Larson said she once saw her father leaving the shower naked, and Ells told her that was child abuse, she said. Ells asked how large her father's genitals were, and when she refused to answer, Ells continued to insist.

"I want one point to be made clear," Larson now says. "In no way, shape or form was I abused as a child."

Quoted Bible

But Ells was relentless, she said. He interpreted many of her feelings as symptoms of childhood sexual abuse and quoted the Bible to back up his theories.

Ricciardi, Ells' attorney, maintains that Larson had indicated to a previous counselor that she was possibly abused by her father.

Larson also said that Ells asked her to imagine her parents in cloaks performing blood rituals and sacrifices within the Mormon temple, she said. The sessions were so intense that Larson would dream of demons that night.

About half of Larson's therapy sessions included prayer that she objected to, including speaking in tongues and laying on of hands, she said.

During his board hearing, Ells testified that he prayed only one or two minutes at the end of each session. Guttilla found that the prayer was more frequent.

Ricciardi wrote that Larson misinterpreted some of Ells' statements and had a tendency to distort the facts.

Larson said she didn't stop seeing Ells because she had doubts about herself and felt obligated to her employers, who had sent her to Ells. The hearing officer agreed.

After five months, Ells told her she needed to go to a clinic for multiple disorders. Instead, she went to a Christian-based clinic in California, part of a chain that now owns Remuda Ranch.

There, Larson said, she was diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and she received gentle counseling and quiet time for reflection.

"They were very supportive and encouraging," she said. "They never presented me as being inadequate. By that time, I was so guilt-ridden. I thought I was a very bad person."

After staying 18 days, Larson returned to Remuda Ranch to see Ells one more time, in January 1993.

She opened the door to his office and said she was shocked to see one of her employees, counselor Karen Thompson, with Ells. Larson had believed Ells was keeping her sessions confidential, but she allowed Thompson to stay.

She decided never to return to Ells. Larson continued working at Remuda Ranch but said she was placed on spiritual probation because she no longer wanted to become a born-again Christian. She was fired in January 1994 after a 30-day suspension.

Larson, who now works as a counselor at Willow Creek Counseling and Consulting Center in Scottsdale, said her views on religion have been shaken.

"I'm extremely afraid of believing in organized religion," she said. "It is very hard for me to hear Scriptures because they were used against me."

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