

# RELIGION

Saturday, April 23, 1988

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# A

By Michelle Bearden

Phoenix Gazette

**W**hen former Jehovah's Witness Linda Welton finally got up the courage to contact her parents last year, she blocked out her fears of rejection and dialed the number of their Paradise Valley home.

A stranger answered. The former occupants, Welton was told, had moved back to the Midwest. He wasn't sure where.

"That's when I knew the ties had really been cut," recalls Welton, a 30-year-old mother of two and a sales representative for a camera company. "Here my parents had moved and didn't even leave me a forwarding address. If that's not insult to injury..."

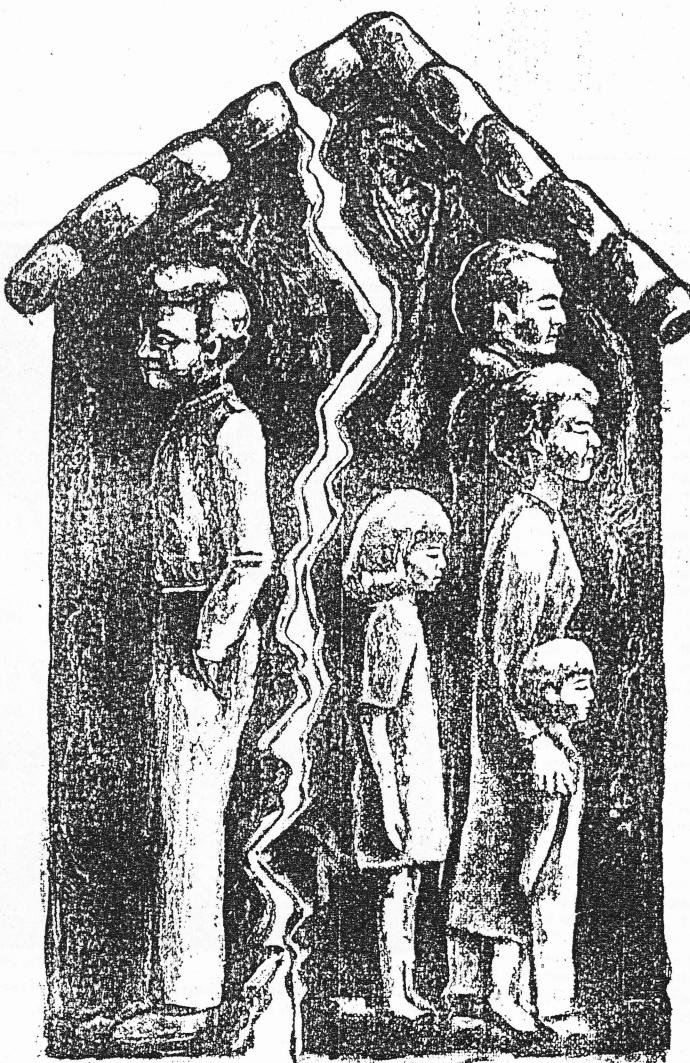
Her voice trails off and her bright eyes darken. After a moment, she regains her composure. It has been nearly three years since she has talked to her parents, and the pain, though dulled, lingers.

The cause of Welton's estrangement is one only understood by Jehovah's Witnesses, followers of a 3.4 million-member denomination with worldwide headquarters in Brooklyn, N.Y.

In the eyes of this apocalyptic sect, Welton had committed two grave sins: She allowed a Christmas tree in the home she shared with her husband, who was raised a Catholic, and she maintained a relationship with her younger brother, a former Jehovah's Witness who had been expelled for wayward behavior, such as drinking and smoking.

For her actions, considered undeniably destructive by the organization, she was "disfellowshipped" in absentia by a three-member court of elders from her local church. The sentence carries a heavy penalty: complete ostracism by family members and friends who remain devout Witnesses.

According to a spokesman for the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, the group's formal name, there's sound reason to banish



La Verne Harris, Phoenix Gazette

Jehovah's Witnesses shun all members who leave the fold, a practice that splits up many families.

members who have either resigned or been expelled from the church.

"It's not something we pulled out of the air. It's a scriptural requirement right out of the Bible," Fred Rusk says in a telephone interview from the church's

headquarters in Brooklyn.

"Yes, it can be traumatic. But sometimes a traumatic situation can help a person understand the truth and lead him back to the right path."

Rusk says the number of mem-

bers who leave annually, either through voluntary disassociation or expulsion by a committee from their local church, is confidential.

In the April 15 issue of *Watchtower* magazine, published semi-monthly by the society, an article

reiterates the Biblical mandate of shunning former members, reminding followers that such discipline is a "test of loyalty to God" and "can yield peaceable fruit."

Rusk says: "We're not anxious to kick people out of the organization. We give fallen members every opportunity to repent. But if they continue to ignore the truth, then we have no choice but to take this action."

That explanation does not ease the burden for Welton, who, since her expulsion, has given birth to her second child and has been severely injured in a car accident. Neither event was enough to restore the support of her parents and older sister.

"You can understand why I consider the Witnesses a cult. What kind of religion pits family members against each other?" she says.

It angers Welton that she must pay such a dear price for leaving an organization that wasn't even her choice in the first place. Raised in the Baptist faith, her parents became Jehovah's Witnesses when she was 10. Living under her parent's roof, she had no choice but to conform to the Witness lifestyle.

That meant not attending high school and earning a correspondence degree instead, so she could "pioneer" door-to-door for the church to recruit new members. The church bases its beliefs on the Bible's teaching that "bad associations spoil useful habits," and frowns upon schooling past the state's mandatory requirement.

It meant not celebrating birthdays or holidays, because the organization believes these are heathenish activities. There was no need to register to vote, because that also is forbidden.

It meant mainly associating with other Jehovah's Witnesses, attending the required five meetings a week, and essentially making the church the center of her life.

When Welton moved into her own apartment at age 19, she began to see the world in a

different light. Against her parents' wishes, she started working full-time at Smitty's and attending classes at Phoenix College.

Not only did her commitments cut into her church-going time, it also opened up a new circle of friends and experiences. Welton started questioning the religion's rigid regulations and eventually, after her marriage to a Catholic, she drifted away from the organization.

It wasn't until she was officially expelled by the church elders that Welton felt the ultimate blow of her actions.

"If you've never been a Witness, you're a potential Witness. There's still hope for you," she explains, bitterness edging into her voice.

"But a Witness who knows the 'truth' and gives it up? You're no better than the spit on the ground. And that's just how you're treated."

Jack Schulze, a substitute teacher who serves as the overseer for Tempe-area Jehovah's Witnesses, declined to be interviewed about shunning, saying "it's better off to be misunderstood than to have something in print that can't be understood."

"What you have (with shunning) is good people doing hard things for the sake of righteousness," he says. "Read the Bible and it will make sense."

David Brown, a volunteer who counsels former Witnesses through the non-denominational Alpha and Omega Ministries in Phoenix, thinks otherwise. A Protestant who converted to the Jehovah's Witnesses against his parents' wishes when he was 15, Brown spent 11 years in the organization, including three years working at the headquarters in the publishing department.

"I bought the whole story. I believed it all, even enough to work in New York in exchange for my room and board and \$30 a month," says Brown, now a bookbinder. "I was dedicated to God's service and I thought I was making

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## Family, friends shun former Jehovah's Witness

By Michelle Bearden

Phoenix Gazette

Ray Franz was far from a casual observer of his faith.

A third-generation Jehovah's Witness, Franz devoted nearly 40 years of his life to his church, serving in nearly every capacity. He culminated his stellar career with a nine-year stint at the top as a member of its elite and powerful 13-man governing body.

But then Franz did the unthinkable: He began to doubt the teachings set forth by his peers at the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, the group's formal name.

"When the world didn't end in 1975," Franz says in a phone interview from his home near Atlanta, "I had to seriously question all the other predictions that fell by the wayside, too. The more I researched, the more I was disturbed."

To question the dogma set forth by his

peers — including his own uncle, Frederick Franz, the organization's president since 1977 — was an offense that risked expulsion. That penalty came with an even stiffer sentence: He faced shunning by his Jehovah's Witness family and friends.

Although his detractors were unable to get the two-thirds majority vote to excommunicate him, Franz was forced to resign from the governing board in 1980 in a purge that included about a dozen officials.

At 58, he found himself with no job prospects, \$10,000 in severance pay and \$600 in personal savings. A Witness friend, Peter Gregerson of Gadsden, Ala., came to his aid, loaning Franz and his wife a house trailer and finding him work as a handyman.

In 1981, Gregerson's own serious doubts about the Witness dogma led to his

resignation. After Franz was seen in a restaurant with the disassociated member, the local leaders had the ammunition to oust Franz.

So in the end, it was not Franz's doctrinal dissension that sealed his fate but a single, technical infraction.

"They make the disciplinary policies and they have the power to see them through," Franz says of the governing board. "It creates a almost siege mentality. I wrote many letters afterward asking for an appeal, but they wouldn't even dignify them with an acknowledgement of receipt. I had become a non-person."

In 1984, Franz broke his own code of silence about his struggle in a self-published book, "Crisis of Conscience." It was his way of responding to the thousands of former or confused Witnesses who had written Franz, sharing their own stories or probing him with questions.

Now in its fourth printing, it has sold 18,000 copies and has become the book of record for fallen Witnesses, who sometimes find it difficult to verbalize their feelings to the secular world.

The faithful, however, have been forbidden to read the book, Franz says. It was banned by the society as heretical.

"The organization essentially condemns independent thinking. This is a second-hand faith, where you do as you're told," he says. "If the society tells you to jump, your only response should be, 'How high?'"

Robert Johnson, a spokesman who works at the Brooklyn headquarters, says there is no official command not to read the book. At any rate, he doubts Witnesses would have any interest in it.

"We've had other people leave and write books. We're really not interested in

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Ray Franz

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following up the accounts of the disgruntled ones," Johnson says. "Our position is that some people have honorable motives, and others have less than that."

Although the book gives an insider's account of the generally closed society, it can't be labeled an exposé, chock-full of shocking revelations. In straight talk, the author details decisions made by the governing board based on "God's law," the affect those dictums have had, and how those decisions could be reversed based on human whims.

"It's an amazing power, even greater than the pope's control of the Roman Catholic Church. Just one board, controlling thousands of publications, every regulation and every concept. I could no longer partake in that power with a clear conscience," he says. "It's their way of telling the followers they don't trust them to use their own minds."

The society, which had modest beginnings in the early 1870s as a Bible study group in Pennsylvania, now claims 3.4 million members. That figure shows a resurgence from an exodus in 1975, Franz says, when disillusioned Witnesses left en masse after the society's prediction of the world's end that year didn't materialize.

According to society literature, the world also was supposed to end in 1914, 1918 and 1925 — but

those assertions fell flat, too. Although the sect shies away from dates these days, it now maintains Armageddon will take place "before the generation that saw the events of 1914 passes away."

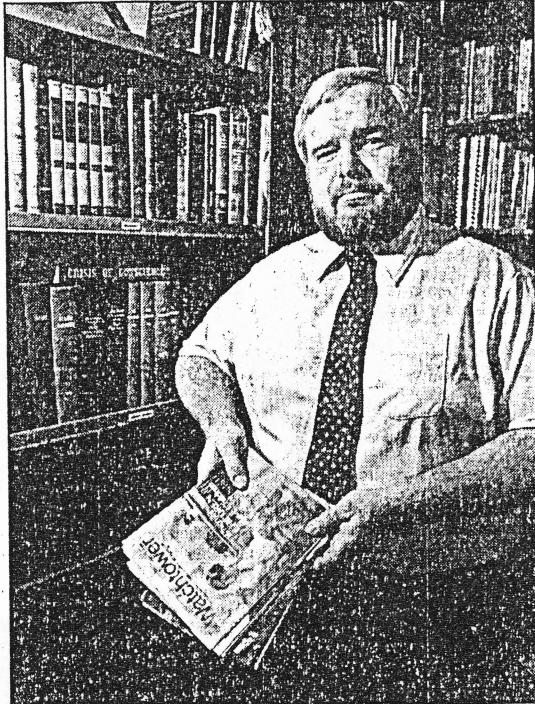
If that's the case, the end is near. And preparing for the end is a full-time pursuit for Witnesses, who believe they will be spared God's wrath and will live forever in a "paradise on Earth" after the rest of the population is annihilated by Jehovah and sent to the eternal grave. A select group of 144,000 followers — of which Franz had been considered a member — will be born again and go to heaven.

"It's an elitist way of thinking that has no room for any other theology," Franz says.

Like any other expelled member, Franz has no contact with his family and former friends. Nevertheless, he says life is "far more meaningful, far more rewarding" since his departure.

It's also free of organized religion and the rules that accompany it.

"I can look at other people's faith now without judging. I can recognize the good in other beliefs, and I know how to have an open mind," he says. "That is the example set by Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, it is contrary to the system set for the Jehovah's Witnesses."



Nancy Engebretson, Phoenix Gazette

Volunteer David Brown counsels former or confused Jehovah's Witnesses through Alpha and Omega Ministries.

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the ultimate commitment.

Like most Witnesses, Brown was prepared for the world to end in 1975, a date predicted by the society's high-powered governing board based on Biblical interpretations. When 1975 passed without Armageddon, the disillusionment and doubt began to set in.

Brown's questioning of the society's interpretation of the Bible and his own research led to his resignation in March 1980. Although he was braced to deal with the shunning, it still was painful to be cut off from his former peers.

"I had good friends and good times as a Witness," he says. "My biggest problem is with the leaders, who claim so much authority. Their track record of failed prophecies and strained theology was unacceptable to me."

Not being a Witness required adjustment at home because his wife did not follow his path. The society "highly regards" the marriage sacrament and only considers adultery a sound reason for dissolving a union. It does not require couples to divorce when one leaves the organization, Brown says, but any spiritual

contact is forbidden.

Members who defy the society's dictums — such as reading forbidden anti-Witness materials or associating with former Witnesses — risk being expelled themselves. For that reason, a Valley elder who joined Brown in an interview insisted on anonymity for fear of losing his standing with the organization.

"I've seen the practice in action. I've sat on the judicial committee that makes those decisions," the elder says. "It can cause such pain and bitterness. I'm not comfortable with it."

In the elder's opinion, the practice of disfellowshipping and shunning "keeps people in ignorance" and puts more emphasis on organizational requirements than Biblical beliefs.

"There is so much good in the society," he says softly. "But if I could change one thing, it would be allowing more consideration for one's own conscience, rather than laying down rules and making all members march to their tune."

Jan, a Scottsdale woman who didn't want her

last name revealed, spent 27 years in the organization until she, her husband and their 12-year-old daughter decided to leave in 1979. Like many former Witnesses, she had been warned that departing the ranks would lead to a demonic existence mired in alcohol, drugs and other immoral activities.

Instead, Jan says they have found the "kind of things they don't tell you about — freedom, independence, happiness and contentment."

"The disfellowshipping is just their way of punishing you, emotionally and mentally. People with weak minds can't stand up to it," Jan says. "If that's not a brainwashing technique, I don't know what is."

But like all former members, the threesome has had to live with the pain of being shunned by family and friends.

"It was like starting all over," she says. "Still, we don't have a single regret over leaving. If anything, we're angry at ourselves for being so dumb and staying in so long. Never again will I accept things blindly without questioning or researching."