

Recent court victories may help keep children out of House of Yahweh

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By Loretta Fulton

Court victories in three states are being cheered by a growing network of people looking for legal means to keep children out of the House of Yahweh.

Cases in Florida, Georgia and Michigan last year resulted in fathers obtaining custody of children whose mothers are affiliated with the Abilene-based sect headed by Yisrayl Hawkins, formerly known as "Buffalo Bill" Hawkins when he was an Abilene policeman.

Each court victory means others who have been unsuccessful in gaining custody will have reason to press on, believes a Florida woman whose son won a court battle.

"As case law builds we can turn around some of the losses," said Lynn Johnson of Jacksonville, Fla.

Hawkins did not respond to requests for an interview with the Abilene Reporter-News.

Johnson is the mother of Mark Johnson, who a year ago won the first child custody case involving a parent tied to the House of Yahweh. Since then two others have been finalized in favor of the father and at least one more is in progress, said Phillip Arnn, chief staff researcher for Watchman Fellowship in Arlington, a cult-watch organization with offices nationwide.

"We're acting as a clearinghouse on cases our people have won," Arnn said.

The court victories and the network of people providing information on how to win child custody cases is significant. Just three years ago a Maryland man stormed the gates of the sect's compound in Callahan County in an effort to retrieve his children and stepchildren.

Instead, he landed in jail on charges of family violence, assault, and interfering with child custody.

Legal challenges have been tried by some parents ever since the House of Yahweh began gaining notoriety in 1996 but with no success until now. One reason is the reluctance of judges to challenge a religious preference because it is unusual, experts say.

But the Johnsons found a defense that came about in a most unusual way. During court proceedings, their son's ex-wife requested a custody evaluation by a psychologist, which the court granted.

The ploy backfired when the evaluation showed the child was being subjected to dangerous indoctrination by House of Yahweh teachings, Johnson said, and the judge ruled the father should get custody.

The ex-wife tried again with a different psychologist with the same result.

"It's not that we came up with a brilliant idea and won -- she came up with it," Johnson said.

Other litigants are building on that success, Johnson said, and the list of psychologists willing to do evaluations is growing.

"We all share those names and put them on the network," she said.

That tactic plus a proactive stance by the plaintiff, usually the father, are keys to success in court, said Arnn, with Watchman Fellowship. Recent court victories prove that.

"That's the difference there," Arnn said. "In all three of these cases you can see that."

Getting a court-appointed psychologist to testify to the dangers of cult indoctrination is key to winning a case involving religion, Arnn said.

"The religious issues can then be brought into the case -- otherwise they cannot," he said.

The plaintiff's attorney can file a motion for a court-appointed psychologist who would be a neutral officer of the court, thereby eliminating prejudice. Because of the complexities involved, Watchman Fellowship is establishing a database of court documents that shows attorneys how to draft motions.

"We think that will be very helpful," Arnn said.

As important as the psychological evaluation is an aggressive stance by the father, Arnn said. Some early court cases posed problems because the mother acted first, filing for divorce and gaining temporary custody of the children.

"That pretty much tips the scale," Arnn said.

All three of the finalized cases plus one in progress involve the father seeking custody because the mother joined the House of Yahweh.

Arnn said it usually is the woman who joins because of the nature of the sect. The women usually have money or will have child support coming if divorced, he said.

"It's women who are getting stuck in this," he said.

Lynn Johnson can speak from personal experience. Her son, Mark, was married and the father of a 5-year-old girl when his wife came into contact with the House of Yahweh.

Mark and his family lived in the Jacksonville, Fla., suburb of Orange Park and were members of a Baptist church. A couple who were friends found the House of Yahweh on the Internet and became interested in its teachings, Lynn Johnson said.

Her son's wife was interested, too, and accompanied the couple to Abilene for one of the three annual feasts celebrated at the compound in Callahan County.

"It was a surprise when all of a sudden she had a whole new Bible and way of life," Johnson said.

Eventually the oddity took a chilling turn. Johnson began researching and came across Hawkins' book, *Reconsidering Yahweh's Laws on Slavery and Marriage Obligations*.

She was stunned to learn what happens to women who go to the compound unattended by their husbands.

"She had to be wife, slave, or concubine to a group member," Johnson said.

Although the ex-wife never took the couple's daughter to Abilene, the child was subjected to House of Yahweh teachings during meetings in Jacksonville attended by 20-30 people, Johnson said.

When the couple decided to divorce, Johnson's son got a restraining order to keep the child in Florida and gained temporary custody. In the meantime, his ex-wife had changed her name to "Hawkins," as more than 250 people have done in Taylor County courts over the past three years.

Her behavior became more of a concern to the Johnsons, who kept petitioning the court for supervised visits.

"They always come back from these feasts more militant," Johnson said.

The court case was finalized in February 1998, and the ex-wife disappeared in July, Johnson said, leaving no clues to her whereabouts.

The most recent child custody case involving the House of Yahweh ended Dec. 30 when a father in suburban Detroit, Mich., gained custody of his three children, ages 12, 8, and 4.

James Byrd, an engineer with Ford Motor Co., was granted custody over his wife, a Detroit pediatrician who got involved with the House of Yahweh in 1995 through a group in Jackson, Mich.

he ex-wife broke all relations with her family, said Constance Cumbey, a Michigan attorney who represented the father.

"She told them she had found the truth," Cumbey said.

Cumbey is author of the book on New Age religion and cults *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow*. She has been involved with a number of cases involving New Age religions over the years, but the House of Yahweh case was the first one she termed a "hard cult."

She has kept files on the Abilene-based group for many years and couldn't believe her good fortune when James Byrd contacted her about representing him.

"When he came in and said, 'House of Yahweh,' I almost exploded," Cumbey said.

Like the Johnsons, Cumbey got a court-appointed psychologist to testify to the dangers of the House of Yahweh teachings, which helped win the case.

Although those cases had happy endings, cult watchers are more concerned than ever about cult activities with the millennium approaching and "end times prophecies" proliferating.

ABC News has a Web site titled "Apocalypse Really Soon" that lists the House of Yahweh as one of "the more prominent millennialist groups."

Newsweek magazine and the New York Times magazine have named the House of Yahweh as a cult to keep an eye on.

Hawkins publishes a magazine from his House of Yahweh headquarters called *The Prophetic Word*, and he has preached end of the world prophecies. He has backed off those prophecies recently, observers say, but still his organization is of concern.

"They consistently are one that I watch closely," said Rick Ross of Phoenix, Ariz., an intervention specialist who serves as an [expert witness](#) in [court cases](#) involving cults.

He has testified in one case involving the House of Yahweh and has been called by numerous other families with ties to the group. Ross considers the House of Yahweh potentially dangerous because its members are totally dependent on Hawkins, even going so far as to change their name to his.

"You just don't know, you cannot predict what these people will do," Ross said.

Cumbey, the Michigan attorney and author, doesn't view Hawkins with the same fearful eye some do, but she agrees with Ross that House of Yahweh members do as Hawkins tells them.

"He has every bit the control -- it's a frightening control," Cumbey said.

Perhaps the person most familiar with Hawkins and his followers is Arnn with Watchman Fellowship. He has been to Abilene, visited with ex-members of the House of Yahweh, and followed their actions closely for years.

Arnn has noticed Hawkins backing away from his end of the world prophecies the past few years.

"He decided he wasn't going to die," Arnn said.

For some time, Hawkins has been advocating moving his sect to Jerusalem to await the end of the world and to set up a new temple. However, that move seems to have gone by the wayside, Arnn said.

"He's got everything he wants," Arnn said. "There's nothing in it for him to keep pressing the gloom and doom of the end of the world."