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Alleged Abuse Victims Urge Going To Police



David Framowitz, a founding member of the new group, alleges he was abused by Rabbi Yehuda Kolko of Torah Temimah in Flatbush.

by Hella Winston and Larry Cohler-Esses
 Special To The Jewish Week

A group of alleged survivors of sexual abuse from strictly Orthodox backgrounds and victim advocates have joined together to encourage Orthodox victims to seek justice in New York's secular courts, rather than quietly within their communities.

The new group, Survivors for Justice, will also lobby the state legislature to pass a long-pending bill to extend the statute of limitations on such crimes so that victims can get into court.

The organization, the first of its kind, will work to break an intimidating communal code of silence, said Mark Weiss, one of its founders. "It's about time that people start recognizing the destructive effects of people's fear of being stigmatized for talking about this issue," said Weiss. "People need to realize that being associated with [the issue of sexual abuse] creates a stigma only if they allow it to. Fear and intimidation under the guise of upholding the reputation of the Torah should have no place in our midst."

The group declares that one of its prime aims will be to support individuals who have been victimized as children by adult staff in yeshivas and other Orthodox institutions in going to law enforcement authorities. Such victims, said co-founder Joel Engelman, "have to deal with all the shame and stigma. There are no visible people out there saying we are here, we went through what you went through, and we're here to help."

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Rabbinic leaders, he added, often apply pressure to keep matters within the community.

Last month Engelman himself came out with his story of alleged sexual molestation at age 8 by Rabbi Avrohom Reichman of United Talmudical Academy, a yeshiva in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, affiliated with the Satmar chasidic sect. (“A Charge Of Double Betrayal In Williamsburg,” Sept. 5) He has filed suit against Rabbi Reichman, UTA and a Satmar summer bungalow colony that also employed the rabbi, charging the institutions were told of the abusive conduct but did nothing.

Weiss, 41, is an alleged survivor of abuse by Rabbi Avrohom Mondrowitz, who was indicted in 1984 on four counts of sodomy and eight counts of sexual abuse in the first degree for allegedly abusing four boys in Brooklyn. Mondrowitz fled to Israel, where he escaped law enforcement until last year, when he was arrested and now awaits a decision on his extradition to the United States.

Another founding member of the group is David Framowitz, 50, who alleges he was molested by Rabbi Yehuda Kolko of Torah Temimah in Flatbush. The group also includes a man who says his son, now 9, was also abused by Rabbi Kolko. Like Rabbi Reichman, Rabbi Kolko now faces civil suits from some of his alleged victims, as do the yeshiva and its principal, Rabbi Lipa Margulies. The plaintiffs charge that the school and its administrators knew of Rabbi Kolko’s conduct but protected him.

Rabbi Kolko was indicted twice by a Brooklyn grand jury on felony sex abuse charges but, in a controversial plea bargain offered to him by Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes, pleaded guilty last spring to two misdemeanor counts of endangering the welfare of a child.

This week, Baruch Sandhaus, 41, another alleged survivor of childhood molestation in a yeshiva, came out for the first time in connection with formation of Survivors for Justice.

Sandhaus, who has been active behind the scenes on this issue for several years, says he is a survivor of molestation by both Rabbis Kolko and Mondrowitz. A civil suit he brought against Torah Temimah as a “John Doe” was recently dismissed due to the statute of limitations.

The group plans to make extending both civil and criminal statutes of limitations for childhood sex abuse one of their main goals.

A bill to extend the statute has passed several times in the state Assembly but has stalled in the Senate, where it is opposed by the Catholic Church and the insurance industry. State Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos (R-Rockville Centre) has voiced concern that it would be difficult to have credible prosecutions of abuse that took place long ago.

Under current law, a victim must bring a civil suit against his molester or against the school he alleges failed to protect him by between one and six years after his 18th birthday, depending on the nature of the allegation. But childhood victims are often unable to process what has happened to them and act on that awareness until decades later, well into their adulthood, according to psychologists.

The pending bill, backed by Survivors for Justice, would extend the statute of limitations for civil suits and criminal prosecutions to the victim’s 28th birthday. It would also open a one-year window during which victims could file civil claims regardless of when their abuse took place.

The pending bill was among the issues highlighted at a press conference at Cardozo Law School on Wednesday focusing on legislative reform to protect children from predators. The event was organized by SNAP, a Roman Catholic group that has fought comparable patterns of sexual abuse by priests — and protection of such priests by fellow clergy and religious institutions.

“There is going to be a price tag which will give the organizations no

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choice but to cease and desist from their protection of the pedophiles,” said one member of Survivors for Justice, who asked to remain anonymous because of his sensitive role as an advocate in the community. “They simply cannot afford to pay the massive amount in damages and hope to continue operations.”

The idea of establishing Survivors for Justice came about as a result of discussions among survivors and advocates, who have connected with one another through their involvement in this issue.

One of the group’s financial backers is Matt Olim, a co-founder of CDNow.com, one of the first successful global online retailers and now a part of Amazon.com. Olim, a philanthropist, is not from a strictly Orthodox background himself. But he began volunteering several years ago as a math tutor for ultra-Orthodox adults working to obtain their GEDs. Through this work and his own research, Olim said, he “learned about the prevalence of sexual abuse in some of those communities, and how it was systematically covered up.”

Approached by some of his contacts for help, Olim eagerly offered support “in the hopes that it will help give a voice to the survivors and stop the abuse from continuing.”

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