False Memories Case Settled for $1 Million

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SPRINGFIELD, Mo. (AP) - Beth Rutherford never knew she had a tormented childhood until she went to a church therapist for counseling.

Under the counselor's guidance, she recalled how her minister father repeatedly raped her, got her pregnant then performed a painful coat-hanger abortion.

In truth, Beth was a virgin, and her father had had a vasectomy years earlier.

Now the Rutherfords have settled a defamation and malpractice lawsuit for $1 million against the church and the counselor. They plan to use the money to travel the country, warning others of the dangers of recovered-memory therapy.

"Had I only known that this type of thing could exist, I think it would have saved our tragedy," Beth Rutherford, 23, said Friday by phone from her home in Tulsa, OK.

Donna Strand, the counselor at Park Crest Village Assembly of God church, and her husband, Pastor Robert Strand, admitted no wrongdoing in their settlement. Through their attorney, they declined comment.

The story began in the fall of 1992 when Beth, then 19, was having trouble sleeping because of work-related stress in her job as a nurse's assistant. Her father suggested she talk to Donna Strand.

After three sessions over four months, Beth reported that her stress was relieved, but she mentioned having dreams in which she and friends were being raped in the presence of her father.

According to the lawsuit, Donna Strand told her those dreams were an indication of early childhood sexual abuse.
Without her parents' knowledge, Beth returned for at least 64 sessions, during which Donna Strand taught the young woman how to enter a trance-like state through self-hypnosis.

Under the woman's encouragement, the Rutherfords say, Beth recalled a string of vile false memories between the ages of 7 and 14: being raped by her father with a curling iron, having a clothes-hanger abortion by her father, and being raped by her father while her mother watched.

To this day, Beth said, she is not certain where the thoughts came from.

"There are times in my therapy sessions that I have no memory of what happened," she said.

The lawsuit said two younger sisters also were interviewed by the counselor but had no memories of abuse.

Nearly two years passed, and the Rutherfords still had no knowledge of their daughter's allegations. But the Strands had informed the General Council of the Assemblies of God, where Rutherford worked. Tom Rutherford was confronted with the allegations and forced to resign Oct. 14, 1994.

But it soon grew worse.

Tom Rutherford, now 46, took any job he could find - from seasonal postman to janitor. Many friends turned away. Yet he never revealed to the church that he had had a vasectomy when Beth was 4, making her pregnancy allegations physically impossible.

"I never told them because I was so personally outraged," he said. "I thought I'm going to preserve a little dignity of my own and not tell them. I knew my innocence."

It took nearly another year of being away from home and away from the hypnosis counseling for Beth to know his innocence, too, they said.

In October 1995, Beth underwent a gynecological exam. It showed she was a virgin.

Beth, now a registered nurse, fully recanted her story. But she feels terrible about her parents.

"I love them with all my heart," she said. "It's sometimes hard to look at them because of what I accused them of. ... They always tell me, 'Beth, we knew that wasn't you.' "
Months after she recanted, the church reinstated Tom Rutherford as a minister.

As for his relationship with his daughter, Tom Rutherford said, "We're closer than we've ever been."

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