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# The SINFUL MESSIAH

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**Parts 3-7**

**Vernon Howell closely directs the grim daily lives of cult members**

By **MARK ENGLAND**  
and **DARLENE McCORMICK**  
c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

Robyn Bunds was one of the first women in the Branch Davidians to be sexually seduced by Vernon Howell.

She seemed out of place among the women in the cult. Many of them had a plain, unfinished look. Even without makeup, Bunds did not lack for polish, not with her luxurious black hair, angular face and piercing eyes. Beneath long, simple skirts, she wore stylish suede boots.

A California girl, Bunds' life at Mount Carmel, the cult's ram-

## ABOUT THE SERIES

In view of the raid Sunday on the Branch Davidians' compound at Mount Carmel, the *Tribune-Herald* has decided to publish in today's paper the remainder of a series on the sect.

Parts 1 and 2 of the series, "The Sinful Messiah," were published in Saturday's and Sunday's papers. The remaining five parts of the series appear beginning here today.

shackle base 10 miles east of Waco, was a stark change from her youth.

Her father, Don, was a design engineer. Her mother, Jeannine,

a nurse. Both were longtime Branch Davidians. In and around Los Angeles, the Bunds lived a middle-class existence, which seemed pampered to Robyn Bunds after she stayed in a tent for a year after going to live with the cult.

She had been drawn slowly into the Branch Davidians, an offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventists.

It definitely wasn't love at first sight between Bunds and Howell, the cult's young prophet and leader. Bunds hated Howell's periodic visits during the mid-80s to her parents' home in the Highland Park section of Los Angeles. Howell thought Bunds was spoiled. He called her "princess" because she slept in a canopy bed. In turn, Bunds felt Howell was ar-

rogant.

One morning, when she was 14 years old, Bunds walked out of her home expecting her brother, David, to drive her to school. David, though, was raptly listening to Howell, then 24.

Her pleas that she was late for school fell on deaf ears. Both men told her to take a walk.

When she returned home that afternoon, Howell was outside with his brother, Roger. When Howell tried to introduce Bunds, she snubbed both of them. She did have something to say to Roger Howell, though.

"Your brother's an a-----," she said.

That remark earned Robyn a harsh spanking from her father.

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# WOMEN

## Leader inspired members to do his will

□ From Page 1A

Vernon Howell had changed what it meant to be a Branch Davidian. Before, Don and Jeannine Bunds sent money religiously to Ben and Lois Roden, the cult's prophets, but they only occasionally visited Mount Carmel. It was being farmed at the time and there were horses for the children to ride.

"Before, it was harmless," Robyn Bunds said. "You sent tithes, had services. When Vernon came along, he totally changed it. He said you had to give him all your money. You had to live on the property. You had to give up everything else. You had to give him your mind... your body."

The cost of being a Branch Davidian rose when Howell became prophet.

Don and Jeannine Bunds spent \$10,000 buying a van for the cult. Later, they bought a house in Pomona, valued at \$100,000, at Howell's request. The house had a rock facing, which reminded Howell of the Biblical parable to build your house upon a rock. Howell wanted a place for the men in the cult to stay while in California, Robyn Bunds said.

### An attempt to escape

She made an attempt to escape Howell's growing influence over her family.

When she was 17 years old, Bunds went to live with relatives in New Bedford, Mass. A few months later, she asked to come home. Her parents said no. She could not rejoin them in California. Howell had left orders for her to report to the piney woods of Palestine, Texas, where the cult was headquartered at the time.

Bunds bowed to her parents' wishes.

Most of the cult members at Palestine lived in plywood boxes. Bunds shared a tent with Michelle Tom, an Australian.

Like the other Branch Davidians, Bunds fell under Howell's spell.

For one thing, she had seen a transformation in him. She remembered hearing him speak at Mount Carmel, before the Branch Davidians acknowledged him a prophet. Howell couldn't connect his thoughts. He tried to preach, but he didn't have anything to say. She had felt embarrassed for him.

Now, just a few years older, Howell seemed to her incredibly articulate, never at a loss for words. He seemed tapped into a never-ending source of Biblical knowledge.

But how?

Lurking behind the Branch Davidians' blind faith in Vernon Howell was the acknowledgment that a ninth-grade dropout was keeping them spellbound. To these intelligent and, in some cases, highly educated devotees there was only one possible explanation: Howell was inspired.

And inspiration meant power in the Branch Davidians. Raw power.

One of the first ways Howell began using that power was to seduce the women in the cult — the single women, at the start, according to former cult members.

### The humble prophet

Bunds had been willing. She believed Howell to be inspired. But, more importantly to Bunds, Howell seemed different from the man she remembered in California. For a proclaimed prophet, he was surprisingly humble, polite and charming.

In fact, he was the only man she had ever seen cry.

When Howell and seven followers stood trial in 1988 for the attempted murder of self-proclaimed prophet George Roden, Howell had wept. He was holding his daughter, Star, in his arms. It had touched Bunds, for she just knew that Howell was thinking more of his followers than himself.

She was in love. Plain, but not simple.

Howell made her a "wife" when she was 17 by having sex with her, Bunds said.

But she had to share Howell. It wasn't easy for her.

When Waco attorney Gary Coker visited Mount Carmel, preparing for the shootout trial, Howell would make it a point to cling to Rachel Howell, his legal wife, like she was his one and only, Bunds said. Howell had married Rachel in 1984, when she was 14 and he was 24.

Bunds occasionally whined to

Howell about not getting enough attention. It stung when he called her spoiled, although she believed him to be right.

Her problems soon multiplied, though.

### A right to 60 wives

Howell began preaching that he was the antagonist of the Bible's *Song of Solomon*, according to Bunds and other former cult members. Howell read the Scripture aloud and said it foretold the number of wives he would have: "threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number."

Translated, Howell was supposedly entitled to 60 wives and 80 concubines, according to Marc Breault, a former Branch Davidian who became a confidant of Howell's.

The wives make up what Howell calls the House of David.

Howell teaches that children from the house will eventually rule the earth with him, Breault and other former cult members said.

In the same prophecy, Howell foretold of the Branch Davidians moving to Israel. There they would become a target of an invading U.S. Army. Howell taught that he would be crucified out of jealousy over his many wives, according to Karl Hennig, a Canadian who studied with Howell but never joined his cult.

It was obvious that Howell meant to make his prophecy come true, said Hennig, a teacher from Vancouver, British Columbia.

"He started sleeping with the girls in the group," Hennig said. "People started to notice. It's one thing to say polygamy is going to happen in Israel at some future point. It's another to say that's what is going on now. The reality of what he's teaching started to press in. I don't think anyone knew he'd be taking women in the group."

Howell went to great lengths to fulfill his prophecy.

### Taking a bride

Former Branch Davidians Bruce and Lisa Gent said Howell visited their Melbourne, Australia, home in 1988. He told them that God had given Bruce Gent's daughter, Nicole, 19, to him as a wife.

It seemed an unlikely union.

In earlier years, Nicole Gent, much like a young Robyn Bunds, thought Howell was someone to laugh at, what with the way "he strutted around like a peacock," Bruce Gent said.

Nicole Gent was at college, but in timing that Bruce Gent calls "uncanny," she arrived home shortly before Howell was to return to America. Howell wooed her with round-the-clock Scripture. Nicole Gent decided to go to Mount Carmel to study Howell's message.

"It's like he cooks women," Lisa Gent said. "He prepares them for the fire by the way he gives his studies. It's mind manipulation."

But Howell had control over Nicole Gent's father and stepmother, too.

One night, before she left, the teen-ager went to the Gents' bedroom.

"Vernon wants me to be his teddy bear for the night," she told them. "Will you give your permission?"

The Gents gave her their blessing, believing Nicole had been chosen for a holy purpose — to help build the House of David.

"At that point in time, yes, I was very influenced," Bruce Gent said. "Nicole had spent four days with him being convinced of the message. It wasn't for me to say yes or no... she was going to have children for the Lord. I shudder when I say that now."

At Mount Carmel, Nicole Gent became Howell's "favorite" wife for a time, Robyn Bunds said.

"It's not like he says that you're his favorite," Bunds said. "It's just obvious. He isn't with anyone else. He's always with you. It's more like a flavor-of-the-month thing."

Nicole Gent's family said she returned to Australia to have her first baby, Dayland, born July 22, 1989.

Her family hid her, Bruce and Lisa Gent said, to keep the pregnancy a secret. Following Howell's instructions, Nicole Gent went out only at night for walks and then wore a wig and glasses.

Nicole Gent complained because Howell wasn't present for the birth of the baby, said her stepsister, Michelle Tom. A former cult member, Tom said Gent confided to her that Howell was the father.

But no father was listed on Dayland Gent's birth certificate,



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Robyn Bunds peers into the courtroom during the 1988 attempted murder trial of Vernon Howell and seven followers. Months later, she would have a son, Shaun, who she says was fathered by Howell.



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Vernon Howell, beaming, began asserting his power after a McLennan County jury acquitted seven of his followers of attempted murder. Charges were later dropped against him. Howell eventually controlled everything from what people ate to how long they slept, according to former cult members.

according to the family of Nicole Gent.

Howell didn't want anyone recording the babies born to unwed Branch Davidian women, Lisa Gent said. He was afraid it would attract unwanted attention from authorities.

No one was tracking the babies, however. Few outsiders knew of the hold Howell had on his followers. Those who did found it hard to fathom.

### Skeptical outsider

Barbara Slawson has two granddaughters in the Branch Davidians and was herself a member in the days of Ben and Lois Roden. Slawson came to Mount Carmel in 1984 at the request of Lois Roden to hear out Vernon Howell, touted as the newest prophet.

Slawson couldn't understand what the others saw in Howell.

"At one time, I wondered if he put something in the water," Slawson said. "Why do they think God gave them brains if they're going to listen to someone and let him make all their decisions?"

Slawson saw the tightness of Howell's grip on cult members through granddaughter Karen Doyle.

He had put the fear of Vernon Howell into her.

After much coaxing one day, Slawson persuaded Doyle and a few other Branch Davidians to go shopping. As they drove along, the car died. A frantic Doyle was sure Howell had intervened supernaturally, Slawson recalled.

"Vernon didn't want us to go," Doyle said.

"He can make the car stop?" an exasperated Slawson asked.

Howell liked to leave cult members guessing on that point.

Branch Davidians didn't depend on Howell just for spiritual guidance. They depended on him for everything. And he had an opinion on everything, from what they wore to what they ate, former cult members said. When Howell first became their prophet, Branch Davidians could buy extra food and juice drinks. Howell forbade any changes in the prescribed diet.

He regularly checked people's living quarters to confirm his followers' obedience, according to former cult members.

A family was thrown out of the Palestine camp after a search revealed they had bought french fries in town against Howell's

wishes, Lisa Gent said. One Branch Davidian was banished from Mount Carmel for eating chocolate chip ice cream.

Howell's edicts were completely arbitrary.

Once, Howell ordered followers not to eat any fruit except bananas, Breault said. Then Howell would not let anyone eat oranges and grapes at the same meal. They could, however, eat oranges and raisins.

It was hard to keep up with the changes.

"First, he was the only one allowed to eat meat," Breault said. "Then he was the only one allowed to drink Coke. Then he was the only one allowed to drink beer. The thing I noticed about Vernon is that whatever he was tempted with, eventually God would get around to saying it was all right for him to do."

### No need to think

Bruce Gent was sure Howell's involvement in every facet of the Branch Davidians' lives and their dependence on him must be tiring. He asked Howell about it once while driving him from Palestine to Waco.

"Isn't it great to get away?" Gent asked Howell.

Howell wanted to know what he meant. Well, Gent asked, wasn't it a relief to get some time to yourself, away from people wanting your opinion on everything, people who couldn't think for themselves?

Gent asked the question good-naturedly, but it upset Howell.

"Why do you need to think your own thoughts?" Gent remembers Howell asking.

Why indeed? There were always plenty of orders from Howell to follow. Guard duty for all was one. The Branch Davidians had gotten their weapons back after the 1988 shootout trial, in which a Waco jury acquitted seven of Howell's followers of trying to kill rival prophet George Roden. Jurors couldn't reach a verdict on Howell, but the district attorney dropped the charges against him.

Soon after, attorney Gary Coker backed his Bronco up to the sheriff's department and deputies loaded it with shotguns and semi-automatic rifles. He returned the weapons to his clients.

Everyone at Mount Carmel did guard duty, even the women — who often brought their children along with them. If any follower

### A GUIDE TO THE NAMES

**Vernon Howell** — Cult leader. He joined the Branch Davidians in the early 1980s. In 1984, cult members acknowledged him a prophet. Followers believe he will lead them through an apocalyptic future to salvation.

**Robyn Bunds** — One of the first women in the cult whom Howell took as a "wife." She has a son, Shaun. Bunds and other former cult members say Howell is the boy's father.

**Shaun Bunds** — The son of former cult member Robyn Bunds. She and other former cult members said Howell is the boy's father.

**Jeannine Bunds** — Mother of Robyn Bunds. A nurse, she delivered many of the babies born to Branch Davidian women. Her daughter left the cult when Jeannine became one of Howell's "wives."

**House of David** — The harem that former cult members said Vernon Howell fashioned out of women in the cult. Children from the unions are reportedly supposed to rule with Howell after the end of the world.

**Michelle Tom** — Daughter of Lisa Gent and stepsister of Nicole Gent. Former cult member said her daughter, Tarah, was severely beaten by Vernon Howell.

**Nicole Gent** — Cult member and daughter of Bruce Gent, a

former Australian cult member. Howell traveled to Melbourne in 1988 and told Gent and his wife, Lisa, that God had given 19-year-old Nicole to him as a wife.

**Bruce Gent** — Former Australian cult member. He and his wife, Lisa, gave Vernon Howell permission to take their daughter as a "wife," believing it was for a holy purpose.

**Marc Breault** — Former confidant of Howell's. Broke away in 1989, moving to Australia. He has devoted much of his time since to debunking Howell's message.

**Elizabeth Baranyai** — Wife of Marc Breault and a former cult member.

**David Jewell** — Non-cult member who sued his ex-wife in 1992 for custody of their daughter, Kiri. Former cult members told the disc jockey that Howell had targeted Kiri for his harem. A Michigan judge ordered his ex-wife to keep Kiri from Howell.

**Kiri Jewell** — School girl whom former cult members testified had been targeted for Vernon Howell's harem. She now stays with her father in Michigan.

**Sherri Jewell** — School teacher who joined the cult. She shares custody of her daughter, Kiri, with her ex-husband, David. But a Michigan judge in 1992 barred her from bringing Kiri into contact with Howell.

had trouble seeing the need for eternal vigilance, Howell warned of the day the world would arise in jealousy over his many wives, Breault said.

The Branch Davidians took target practice, but they were far from Marines.

### Brush with danger

A *Tribune-Herald* carrier learned that early one morning in 1988.

An elderly Hawaiian couple at Mount Carmel subscribed to the newspaper. When the carrier backed his car into the entrance, sliding the paper into a slot next to the mailbox, the lights flashed on the dozing guard.

Startled, he jumped up and fired a shotgun into the air.

The guard was apologetic, but the newspaper's circulation department asked the Branch Davidians to move the slot for the paper farther down the road, away from the entrance.

Breault, with his poor vision, was exempt from guard duty. He spent his time at Mount Carmel hacking at his computer and practicing his music.

He hated the place. It was isolated, out in the boonies of McLennan County, near Tradinghouse Lake. Miles from anywhere. A far cry from Hawaii and California, where Breault had spent his youth and college years. The Dallas Cowboys football team was about the only attraction Texas had for him.

Howell had taken a liking to Breault, who was easy-going and book smart, having gotten his master's degree in religion from Loma Linda University while in the cult.

He encouraged Breault's search to discover if he, too, was a prophet, telling him to write down his dreams. Breault shared them with other cult members

and together they pondered their meaning.

Breault, like most of Howell's followers, was a former Seventh-day Adventist. He considered it a dying church. Howell had offered a chance to bring about its reformation, through his teachings and his rock 'n roll band. At first, it was exciting. Howell had prophesied that the band would be a hit, luring converts to the Branch Davidian message.

The prophecy fizzled.

But what upset Breault more was the Branch Davidians' slavish worship of Howell. People acted like he was God or something. Also, Howell's relentless pursuit of the single women in the group was grating.

### Afraid to walk out

More and more, Breault wanted to leave.

But Breault had to admit that he didn't have the courage to leave.

What if Howell was right? If he bucked Howell's authority and was wrong, hellfire awaited him. Of that, Breault was sure. Look at the people who doubted Moses. They didn't make it to the Promised Land. Like many Branch Davidians, Breault feared dying and going to hell. Hell wasn't abstract to him, as it is to many people raised in traditional churches.

Somehow, Howell seemed to recognize those fears — and the real source of his power.

"Sometimes, to illustrate what hell would be like, how the people would scream, he'd start screaming," Breault said. "He once said it would be worse than someone flaying off your skin with nail clippers. It was certainly graphic. It got your attention."

So Breault hung on. He didn't know what it would take to make him leave. But he was about to find out.



**An incident involving Vernon Howell and a young girl sparks Marc Breault to leave**

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK  
c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

Marc Breault played a computer game — a simulation of the TV show "Star Trek" — while he waited outside the bedroom of cult leader Vernon Howell one night in 1989.

A blind man staying up to see what he could see wasn't as ludicrous as it sounded. Although legally blind, Breault had some vision. When bowling, for example, he could see a "triangle of white," although he had trouble picking out individual pins.

Breault wanted to know if Howell, the prophet leader of a Waco-based cult called the Branch Davidians, was having sex with a 13-year-old Australian girl.

He had objected when Howell talked of bringing her to America, Breault told a Michigan court a year ago during a child custody case concerning another child in the cult.

Breault had watched quietly while Howell proclaimed the right to have sex with the single women in the cult, but the Australian girl was different.

It wasn't just her age. The girl had not been raised as a Branch Davidian, a bizarre spinoff of the Seventh-day Adventists. He told Howell that it wasn't right to bring over such an innocent girl just to have sex with her, Breault testified.

Howell, after their argument, said he would not take the Australian girl as a wife, Breault said, but when she and her family came to live at Mount Carmel, the cult's base 10 miles east of Waco near the Elk community, Breault began to suspect Howell had lied to him.

So Breault set a trap. Late one night, he entered an office on the first floor of what had been the cult's old church. Upstairs was Howell's bedroom. Breault wrote a few unimportant letters on his computer, in case anyone asked what he was doing there.

Mostly, he played a computer game — and waited. The next morning, the Australian girl emerged from Howell's bedroom, Breault said. He called out a greeting. Surprised, the girl asked why Breault was there. Just getting an early start, he said. She shrugged and left.

"I realized it wasn't a matter of Biblical anything," Breault testified in Michigan. "He just wanted to have sex with her. Because she really didn't know what he was teaching."

Breault and other former cult members said Howell had talked publicly about having sex with underage girls — in 1986 telling his followers that God had ordered him to "give seed" to a 14-year-old American girl.

Two years later, when Breault broke up with a girlfriend, Howell consoled him by talking about his own problems. He said it wasn't easy trying to please all his wives in the House of David — the harem of single women in the cult whose children were supposedly destined to rule the next life with Howell.

Howell asked him to guess his favorite wife, Breault said.

He named Howell's legal wife, Rachel Howell. No, Howell told him. Not her. Breault said he rattled off more names, but not the name of Howell's favorite wife.

Finally, Breault gave up. **Howell did the talking**

Howell said his favorite wife was Rachel's younger sister, Breault told the Michigan court in 1992.

Breault said he never forgot Howell's next words.

"Can you believe it, Marc? She's been with me since she was 12 years old."

Howell's secret eventually became the talk of the Branch Davidians. And Howell did the talking, 10 former cult members said.

Bruce Gent, an Australian once in the cult, said he was in a Bible study when he heard Howell relate the first time he had sex with his wife's sister.

"When he got into bed with her, she was only about 12," Gent said. "He talked about taking her pants off. There was a big fight. She was trying to look after her own, to protect herself. He made a big joke of it. A warped bloody mind he's got."

Robyn Bunds, a former "wife"

of Howell's, remembers not questioning Howell's account of having sex with his wife's sister.

"But now that I'm out here, living a normal life, I realize it was rape," Bunds said. "It was rape. When he describes it, he says (the girl) thought he was getting in bed to get warm. That's what he said. When he tried to pull down her panties, she tried to get him not to. She was 12 years old. She trusted him. He's her sister's husband. She was 12. I remember being 12. She resisted, but he kept on going because he said God told him to. Psychologically, it's weird. But you got used to it. It was normal."

The girl's brother, Joel Jones, who fled the cult, also said that Howell had sex with his sister.

"There was no mystery," Jones said. "You were either blind or you could see. There was a lot of perversion going on out there. Vernon going after all those young girls. It's not right. It's not a normal life."

According to state records, Jones' sister gave birth to a baby girl Feb. 3, 1989. She was 14.

The space on the birth certificate for the father's name was left blank.

Howell denies fathering any children in the cult besides the two, Cyrus and Star, born to his legal wife, Rachel, whom he married when she was 14 years old.

Birth certificates show that at least two single women and one girl identified by former cult members as Howell's so-called wives had babies. None of them listed their babies' father on the birth certificate.

**No recorded father**

A copy of the California birth certificate for Wisdom Bunds records his birth in Pomona on Nov. 14, 1988. Robyn Bunds is listed as the mother, but there is no recorded father.

Bunds, 23, has since changed her son's first name to Shaun.

She said Howell is the boy's father. Howell ordered her not to list his name on Shaun's birth certificate, Bunds said.

"Why do you have to put unknown for the father?" Robyn Bunds asked. "Think about it. He was afraid someone was keeping track of all the babies he was having."

Dana Okimoto, then 22, gave birth to a son, Sky Borne, on Sept. 10, 1988, in Torrance, Calif.

No father is listed. The birth certificate says "Declined to state."

Okimoto refused to identify the father of her son, but former cult members — including Bunds, who traveled with Okimoto from Mount Carmel to the Los Angeles area in 1988 for the birth of their babies — said Howell is the father.

A former cult member listed until 1991 as a midwife in McLennan County said Howell eventually quit registering many of the babies born at Mount Carmel.

Jeannine Bunds, Robyn's mother, said she delivered twin girls to Howell's young sister-in-law at Mount Carmel in 1991. A nurse, Bunds said she also delivered Okimoto's second baby. According to Bunds, Howell directed her not to register the births, which is a Class C misdemeanor.

Howell was reportedly not discreet within the Branch Davidians about his sexual relationships, though.

During a Bible study, Howell talked about the first time he had sex with the 13-year-old Australian girl, two former cult members said. Howell said the girl's heart beat so hard that he could actually hear it.

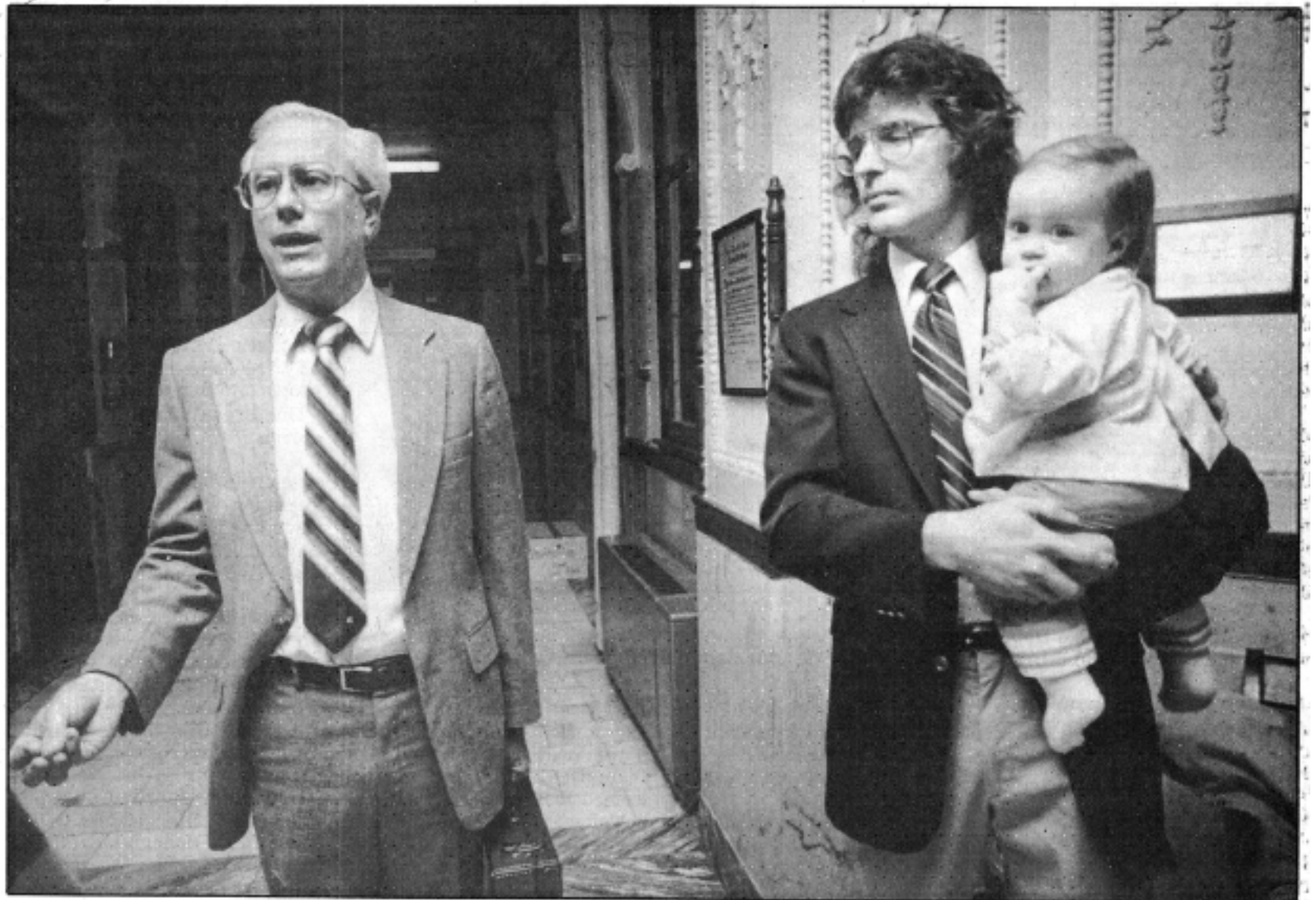
"You know when an animal's scared, how its heart just pounds?" Robyn Bunds asked. "That's how Vernon said her heart sounded. Like when you're hunting something is how he put it. That's how he said the heart of all the girls sound when he's with them for the first time."

Howell dismisses the charge that he had sex with underage girls. He argues that former cult members who make the allegations are followers of Breault. However, Robyn Bunds heatedly denies Howell's contention, calling it "part of his paranoia."

Peter Roenfeldt, pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Melbourne, said Breault attends his church regularly.

"I have heard that is a rebuttal that is coming from the cult in Waco Texas, but he certainly has not held himself out as a prophet in any sense, certainly not in the three, three-and-a-half years that I've known him."

The fear that Howell took minors in the cult as "wives" led a



c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

Vernon Howell says he has only two children, Cyrus, and Star, whom he is holding in the photo. The mother of both children is Rachel Howell, his legal wife. Former cult members say Howell has more than 15 "wives." With Howell is attorney Gary Coker.

Michigan man to take legal action last year.

David Jewell, never a cult member, sued for custody of his daughter, Kiri, then 10, after an October 1991 telephone call from Breault. Jewell's ex-wife is a longtime Branch Davidian.

Breault asked David Jewell if his daughter wore a pendant.

As Breault had predicted, she wore a Star of David. What Breault said next enraged Jewell and made him fear for Kiri's safety.

"He said Kiri was targeted," Jewell said.

All Howell's wives or wives-to-be wore a six-sided Star of David, Breault told a St. Joseph, Mich., court in February 1992.

Breault, his wife Elizabeth Baranyai, and Jean Smith, all former cult members, paid their way to Michigan to testify on behalf of David Jewell.

Howell wanted Kiri Jewell for his harem, Breault testified.

During the summer of 1989, Breault said he and Kiri, along with her mother, met Howell while walking at Mount Carmel.

"Howell walked up and said hello," Breault wrote in a sworn affidavit. "He asked Kiri whether she had been behaving lately. Kiri responded that she had been behaving. Howell said this was good, because if she wanted to be in the House of David, she would have to be a good girl."

Robyn Bunds also said she heard Howell discuss the House of David with Kiri.

"If Kiri and her friends acted up," Vernon would say, "You have to act like ladies if you want to be in the House of David," Bunds said. "It blew me away."

Judge Ronald Taylor granted joint custody of Kiri Jewell to her parents, but he ordered Jewell's ex-wife to keep her young daughter away from Howell.

The suffering started early at Mount Carmel, according to former cult members, who said that Howell at one time taught that parents should spank their children at 8 months of age.

It was full-contact whipping, too, enough to leave its mark on a baby's buttocks, according to former cult members. They said Howell didn't spare the rod, often using a large wooden spoon with a straight handle and almost spatula-like bottom.

Howell denied the allegation. He teaches that babies be "constrained" for discipline, Howell said. Starting at age 4, discipline should include spanking, he said.

But former cult member Michelle Tom told the Michigan court differently, in a sworn affidavit. She wrote that Howell hit Tarah Tom, her daughter by husband James Tom, on her buttocks with the wooden spoon for more than 30 minutes in 1988.

Tarah earned Howell's wrath by crying when put on his lap, the affidavit said.

"My baby was 8 months old at the time and when he finished, her bottom was badly bruised and bleeding," Tom wrote.

A former cult member, who does not wish to be identified, saw Tarah shortly after the whipping and said "her bottom was completely black and blue."

Please see CHILDREN, Page 8A

**Experts: Branch Davidians dangerous, destructive cult**

By DARLENE McCORMICK and MARK ENGLAND  
c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

The Gospel According to Vernon Howell is a dangerous, volatile swerve out of the mainstream, say two cult experts who have talked to some of Howell's former followers.

They say Howell's brand of religion constitutes a cult and that Howell controls the minds of his followers.

"The group is without a doubt, without any doubt whatsoever, a highly destructive, manipulative cult," said Rick Ross, a cult deprogrammer who works in Phoenix, Ariz. "Vernon Howell is the absolute authoritarian leader of this cult. He controls everything and everyone in that compound, period."

Although he is not a mental health professional, Ross has developed an educational curriculum on the subject of cults and serves on a nationwide committee on cults and missionaries for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in New York.

He has been involved in more than 200 destructive cult cases, including the deprogramming of one of Howell's former followers, Ross said.

Ross compares Mount Carmel, the Branch Davidians' base 10 miles east of Waco, to Jonestown, a settlement of American cultists in South America's Guyana led by the Rev. Jim Jones. On Nov. 18, 1978, more than 900 people there killed themselves by drinking cyanide or were murdered.

Ross said, "I would liken the group to Jim Jones... from the standpoint that it's in a compound; it's isolated; it's extremely totalitarian..."

**Conditioned to be passive**

Priscilla Coates, a 10-year Cult Awareness Network volunteer based at the organization's Glendale, Calif. office, also said Howell's group is "unsafe or destructive." The Cult Awareness Network is a non-profit group with chapters in 21 states that addresses the issue of cults. Coates was national director of the group when it was known as Citizens Freedom Foundation Cult Awareness Network.

Both Ross and Coates said they talked with two people who left the Branch Davidians.

The two cult experts said they believe Howell practices mind control.

Ross says Howell breaks down cult members to where they have little or no sense of self-worth or individuality. They are conditioned to be passive and obedient.

Mind control comes from isolation, control of the environment and setting up doctrines that override an individual's needs, Ross said.

He said Howell twists people's belief in God into a commitment to him.

Ross said most people at Mount Carmel probably would not say they are committed to Howell as their absolute leader. They probably would say they are committed to God. Their commitment to Howell, in their minds, is synonymous to their commitment to God, he said.

**Followers become accepting**

Ross said he deprogrammed a man who had been with Howell for at least five years. The man said he was afraid to be identified, but he told *Tribune-Herald* reporters that he attended long Bible studies, sometimes for 18 hours, while in the cult. People go into the cult wanting to learn, so they open up and become accepting, he said.

"You reach a point where you'll see things go on or you'll be told things, and they'll go against your better judgment," he said. "But because you're now starting to doubt that you can trust your own judgment, you can see a conflict start to develop in your mind."

Individuals in the group were broken down, the former cult member said. Every aspect of life was controlled, from finances to food, he said.

**"The cults themselves always say these are disgruntled members — that's their standard line and... that they're lying. 'Our feeling is that they have no reason to lie to us.'"**

**Priscilla Coates, Cult Awareness Network volunteer**

Ross and Coates said the man was used for physical labor on various construction projects at Mount Carmel.

He was "physically depleted," Ross said of the man. "There's a rigorous work program going on in there... they are essentially a free labor force at Howell's beck and call..."

The former cult member said building projects included a pool and a gym. He said followers would often work on empty stomachs.

**Working without food**

Sometimes it would be torment, he said. Cult members would go without food all day, and then Howell would hold Bible studies late at night, "berating" members for various things. All the while, Howell would be eating, perhaps something as rich and tempting as ice cream, he said. Afterward, they got to eat.

Howell's group was detrimental to the man he deprogrammed, Ross said.

The man said he feels angry over the lost years he spent with Howell. Sometimes, though, he still wonders about Howell's seemingly superhuman knowledge of the Bible.

"When I die, am I going to end up standing in front of this guy?" he asked.

Ross said just about anybody can get involved in a cult — that members are "basically just like anybody else."

Another former member, Robert Scott of Colorado, said Howell's group could recruit anyone.

"I don't care who you are, you could be the strongest person in the world," Scott said. "I don't care who you are because all they need is a foothold."

**Exploiting the vulnerable**

Scott said Howell freely admitted the group was a cult. But Scott said he never perceived the use of mind control.

"Does the spider ever say to the fly he's going to eat him?" he asked.

Cults exploit people who are vulnerable. Recruits may be suffering from the death of a loved one, experiencing a job change, or starting college, Coates said.

Coates said that Howell probably uses many of the Branch Davidians' past connection to the Seventh-day Adventists to gain easier access to potential recruits.

The religion believes in modern-day prophecy. She believes the stories of the people who came to her from Howell's cult, Coates said.

"The cults themselves always say these are disgruntled members — that's their standard line and... that they're lying," she said. "Our feeling is that they have no reason to lie to us."

Ross said he believes Howell is prone to violence, as he has already demonstrated through a 1987 shootout with his rival, George Roden.

Speaking out and exposing Howell might bring in the authorities or in some way help those "being held in that compound through a kind of psychological, emotional slavery and servitude," he said.

Ross said authorities need to understand that Howell is fully capable of violence.

"You would say that is a very dangerous group," Ross said.

File photo





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File photo

Former cult members like Robyn Bunds (second woman from right) say cult leader Vernon Howell taught that daughters of Branch Davidians should be groomed to become his "wives."

## CHILDREN

### Cult leader had sex with underage girls

□ From Page 7A

Tom, who later left the cult, did not protest the whipping.

"It's like you're in shock," she said in an interview. "He always played on your emotions. If I had shown emotion, he might have taken her away from me or something."

She wanted to grab Tarah and leave Mount Carmel, Tom said. It was the first real whipping her daughter had received. But it was only wishful thinking — "How do you get out with a child through an armed guard in the middle of winter?"

Howell didn't just punish the children of other Branch Davidians, former cult members said. He was particularly harsh to his son, Cyrus.

### Boy slept in garage

Once, Cyrus refused to call Nicole Gent "mommy," Breault told the Michigan court. She had been babysitting the boy. Howell ordered his son to sit next to Gent, the daughter of Bruce Gent and reportedly one of his "wives." When Cyrus, then about 3 years old, refused, Howell forced him to sleep on the kitchen floor and go without food.

After a couple days, Howell told Nicole Gent to feed Cyrus, who was so weak he could not eat by himself, Breault testified.

That night, Howell made Cyrus sleep in the garage of the cult's house in Pomona, Calif. Howell told the boy that large rats prowled the garage, and they ate naughty boys, according to former Branch Davidian James Tom.

Tom said Howell ordered him to take Cyrus to the garage.

"I told Vernon that it wasn't a good idea, because there were rats there," Tom wrote in an affidavit. "Vernon made me take him anyway and told me to make sure I told Cyrus that there were rats. The child was terrified. Cyrus was made to sleep on a hard bench taken out of the shuttle bus and was beside himself with fear."

During a 1986 Bible study in Palestine, Texas, Cyrus, then about 1 year old, began crying, Bruce Gent said.

The baby had been left alone inside a bus.

Howell, irritated at the disruption, made several trips to the bus to strike his son, Gent said. Each whipping reportedly lasted several minutes.

The boy's screams from the bus haunted the church, Gent said.

"After 5 to 10 minutes, the cries became whimpers and Vernon would return," said Breault, who was also at Palestine. "Then Cyrus would start crying again. Vernon would go back to the bus. You could hear the spans from where we were."

Neither Cyrus' mother Rachel Howell nor any other member in the cult left to comfort the baby, Breault and Gent said.

"It's hard to understand if you've never been there," Breault said. "But we're talking about a man who was supposed to be a prophet. He was giving the words of life. You were not supposed to miss out."

### Eating cinnamon

Jean Smith, a former cult member who also testified in the Michigan case, said Cyrus and another boy were once made to eat a tablespoon of plain cinnamon, which is extremely bitter, after being caught sampling a

cinnamon jar at the Branch Davidians' house in La Verne, Calif.

Howell's petulance often led him to whip children, Robyn Bunds said.

She said Howell hit 10-month-old Shaun Bunds with a paddle at Mount Carmel after the baby wouldn't come to him.

"I was shocked," Bunds said. "But I realized he wanted him to love his father. In a normal family, the child knows who his father is. But Vernon was never around to know as a daddy. He shows up and thinks it's time to discipline Shaun because he's spoiled. He's not spoiled. He was scared of Vernon."

Bunds said Shaun Bunds' bottom bled after the whipping.

"You know how soft and sensitive a baby's skin is?" Bunds asked. "His bottom was hit so much that the skin was raw. It's not like a scrape. It's just where the skin is hit so much that it bruises and can't take any more and bleeds."

### Lasting effects

She believes the whippings had lasting effects.

At the recommendation of Shaun Bunds' day care center, Bunds has scheduled an appointment for her son to meet with a therapist. Day care teachers report that Shaun Bunds is emotionally underdeveloped, Bunds said. They told Bunds that her son is easily frustrated and cries often.

Bunds blames her son's problems on Howell's inattention and harsh discipline.

Howell, though, claims Bunds whipped Shaun.

"Yeah, I spanked him," Robyn Bunds said. "I'm not proud of it. I want to throw up, to know I let him get to me in that way. I'm sorry I did that. There's no way to take it back. But I was told to. The hardest thing for me of all this is to know I did it, too. All I can say is I was in a certain frame of mind. Vernon said even if a child died from a spanking they would go to heaven. You're thinking from a worldly perspective. You don't think like that in a cult. You can't think that way or you won't survive for one day."

Day by day was how Breault had survived for a long time.

Finding out about Howell and the 13-year-old Australian girl, though, finally pushed him to act. Breault had considered her innocent, not only of sex but of Branch Davidian teachings.

In May 1989, Breault applied to Australian officials for an immigration visa.

His new bride, Elizabeth Banyai, a native Australian, went on ahead to Melbourne, to earn money to pay Breault's way over.

Breault missed her, but it had to be done.

Thoughts swirled in his head in those days. He didn't really know what he believed any more. But after Breault sat through a Bible study in Pomona on Aug. 5, 1989 and heard Howell's so-called New Light, he knew one thing.

Getting his wife out of the country had been providential.

## Part Five

### Vernon Howell's teaching of the New Light leaves followers thunderstruck

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK  
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Vernon Howell picked California to reveal the "New Light," a teaching which led to a major rift in the Branch Davidians.

About four hours into a sermon

at the cult's Pomona house on Aug. 5, 1989, Marc Breault saw Howell cock his head and melodramatically look up, or so it seemed to Breault. It was as if Howell was listening to someone. It was like, "Yeah, now I see the light," Breault recalled.

Howell told his followers that he was the Lamb mentioned in the Bible book of Revelation, the one who would open the Seven Seals and lead them all to salvation. That they had heard before and believed. It really didn't prepare them for what followed, though.

Howell "annulled" all marriages.

All women in the cult, in fact all women, belonged to the Lamb, Howell said. He was their perfect mate. The men's perfect mate was already part of them. Howell recounted the story of Adam and Eve and how Eve came from Adam's rib. Breault said. The men, if they henceforth remained celibate, would get their perfect mates in heaven in the same manner as Adam. But the married men must give up their earthly wives — to Howell.

"Who could understand you better than someone who had lived inside you?" asked Bruce Gent, a former Branch Davidian who heard the New Light during Howell's subsequent visit to Australia. "That's the way he presented it."

Marriage was really just glorified adultery, Howell said, according to Breault and other former cult members.

Men and women were only seeking a moral sanction for their raging hormones, while Howell wanted the cult's women in order to have the babies who would usher in Paradise.

The message left the men numb.

Howell's New Light wasn't spontaneous, a whimsy. It was the logical progression of what he had been teaching for years, his utter devotion to building the House of David — having sex with numerous women and girls in the cult to produce children that Howell claimed would one day rule the hereafter with him.

It was just the next step, so much so that some Branch Davidians staying at Mount Carmel, the cult's base 10 miles east of Waco, guessed what was up when they heard rumors that Howell had delivered a new message.

"Everyone was speculating what it was," said Robyn Bunds, a single woman already in the House of David. "It was like, 'The only thing left is he's going to take our wives.' What the hell else was left? There wasn't anything else surprising to do."

As Breault left the room in Pomona after the 13-hour Bible study, Howell wrapped his arm around his neck.

"So, Marc, how does it feel now that I'm stuck with Elizabeth?" Howell asked.

Elizabeth was Elizabeth Banyai, Breault's wife of three months.

Over my dead body, Breault thought.

### Always wanted more

Life with Vernon Howell had been more than Breault could stomach for some time. When it came to wives, Howell was like a miser about money: he hoarded what he had, and he always wanted more.

Now Howell was turning the Branch Davidians into a harem and the men into virtual eunuchs sworn to guard its secret.

Most married men stayed after Howell took their wives. To those who left the cult, and to outsiders, they were saps, but they couldn't bear the thought of leaving. It

threw them into despair. For if they left, what was all the suffering for? Why had they spent all those years in the cult? For nothing, that's what. And that was too painful for most Branch Davidians to face.

Breault knew. He had experienced all those feelings.

He had talked himself into remaining in the cult time after time: after Howell began using the Bible as if it were the "Kama Sutra"; after Howell boasted of sex with underage girls; after he beat the cult's children; and after he tried to turn mild-mannered people into commandos.

But Breault had finally had enough.

He had applied to Australian officials in May 1989 for an immigration visa. The New Light made him even more anxious to leave and thankful his wife had left earlier that summer. Howell clearly had broken the standard to which the Bible holds prophets, Breault decided, for his teaching contradicted the Bible — which teaches that marriage is an honored institution.

A month after the New Light, Australian authorities granted Breault a visa.

Breault telephoned an aunt who lived in Mission Hills, Calif. While most Branch Davidians were away working, she picked him up at the Pomona house. He took all he could carry in a suitcase, leaving behind thousands of dollars in computer equipment.

The men and women who remained were quickly separated by Howell, who told cult members that it was for their own good.

To show why, Howell asked one woman to hike her skirt during a Bible study, two former cult members said. The woman obeyed, exposing her panties. Howell asked the men if they were sexually aroused. Almost all the men raised their hands. After thanking the woman for her obedience, Howell told his followers that it's impossible for men and women to be friends. Sooner or later, men will want to have sex with women. They can't help themselves, Howell said.

Eventually, the men and women came together only for Bible studies. Howell harshly rebuked husbands who tried to maintain contact with their wives, former cult members said.

One cult member who lost his wife to Howell said he gave her up because of "what they were going to accomplish in the kingdom." Bruce Gent said.

Life on earth, though, became hell for the married men in the cult.

### Lives torn asunder

"When I was there . . . I mean guys were in tears about it, that God wanted them to give up their wives," said a former cult member, who fears harm if identified. "They were heartbroken."

The men and women who had their lives torn asunder by the New Light may have thought their lot was hard, but Howell, in his mind, always had it worse.

He constantly sought sympathy, former cult members said.

"He would say it's not easy being in his position," Breault said. "All women have things about them you don't like. Rachel has big feet. She was not perfect. Dana was too short. She was not perfect. He was looking forward to the kingdom of God where they're perfect."

Howell talked woefully of his struggle to build the House of David in an audio tape delivered to the cult's Australian members.

### 'What is love?'

"In my body has been desire, but it deceived me," Howell said on the tape. "I looked upon the desire and said, 'This is love,' but once that love came through my testicles and left out the head of my mind and went into their body, my body turned into hatred, my body found no more desire and my body ached, my stomach grabbed a hold of me and says, 'You don't love these girls.' I said, 'God, what is love?' God said, 'No man knoweth love, nor hate, by all the things that he sees under the sun.' And I persevered. I continued my work, feeling dead, feeling lonely, feeling like a dirty dog, cause God said they that bear the vessels of the Lord shall triumph."

Such lamentations won Howell only support from most Branch Davidians, who felt he was suffering for them.

But Robyn Bunds had seen enough.

The striking black-haired California girl had joined the House of David when she was 17, about the time of the shootout with would-be prophet George Roden,

who later was sent to the Vernon State Hospital after being found not guilty of an Odessa murder by reason of insanity.

Bunds, at first, had been beguiled by Howell and an early prophecy that one of his wives would become the bride of Christ.

"It was like a beauty contest," Bunds said. "All of us battling against each other to be this woman that God thinks is the greatest. It was like a fairy tale. When I was young, I went to Disneyland and watched all these Disney movies, like Cinderella. In the light he teaches, a man on a white horse comes and takes you away. Back then, I was still dreamy-eyed. I wasn't into reality."

She was now, though. Part of it was just growing up. Part of it was having a son, Shaun. But the biggest part of it was the New Light.

Robyn Bunds had never liked sharing Howell, but she did, until the New Light made her realize how preposterous it was to be one of Howell's "wives."

One of the first married women whom Howell took was Bunds' mother. Jeannine Bunds was in her early 50s, an attractive woman who looked younger than her age. She was married to Don Bunds, a design engineer who was 10 years older than his wife.

Jeannine Bunds admittedly found Howell's attention flattering.

For Robyn Bunds, though, learning that Howell was having sex with her mother was too "weird."

She wasn't angry at her mother. For Jeannine Bunds, it was a chance to feel young again, to contribute to building the House of David and, perhaps, making more of "those beautiful children" that were all over Mount Carmel. Jeannine Bunds said Howell prophesied that she would become pregnant if they had sex. She would have a child for the Lord.

Her daughter, who had one such child, no longer believed in the House of David. She believed Howell was just a plain, ordinary Bible-thumping lecher.

"I've had his child. He's slept with my mother," Robyn Bunds said. "I can't think of anything weirder. He doesn't even try to justify it. It's against the Levitical law in the Bible. Did you know that? It's against Levitical law to have a woman and her mother or a woman and her sister. He uses that law when it backs up something he has to say. But when it doesn't, he explains it away."

### Big on control

Jeannine Bunds said she now thinks Howell had another reason in mind when he took all the wives in the cult than just building the House of David.

It came to her when Howell separated the married men and women.

"It gave him more control," Jeannine Bunds said. "He's big on control. If you're married, you talk, you discuss things. But if you're not with your mate at night, you can't talk, you can't put Vernon down. You don't have anybody. You're isolated."

The New Light sickened Robyn Bunds. She vowed to leave the cult. But she would learn that her remark after hearing of the New Light was wrong.

Howell hadn't run out of surprising things to do.

## Part Six

### Some followers start looking for a way out of Branch Davidians and Vernon Howell's control

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK  
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Detective Ron Ingels thought he was back in the '60s when he entered the house at 2707 White Ave. in La Verne, Calif.

Ingels accompanied Robyn Bunds to the two-story white stucco in the summer of 1990. Police had a warrant to search for her young son, Shaun Bunds. Once inside, police found the house set up like a dormitory. One room had a single bed, but all the other rooms had bunk beds.

It reminded Ingels of a commune.

Arriving on a Saturday, police had interrupted a Sabbath service. There were men downstairs who had come over from the cult's Pomona house. When police went upstairs, they found about 20 women and one man.

Vernon Howell.

Howell, 33, is the prophet lead-

er of the Branch Davidians, a Waco-based spinoff of the Seventh-day Adventists — which mainline Adventists frankly consider to have rocketed off into orbit.

"He was there by himself with all the women," said Ingels, now the police chief. "And the women indicated that they were dedicated and loyal to Howell and would do anything he said. It was a strange situation. All the men stayed in Pomona. All the women stayed with Howell."

La Verne looks and feels like a village, with large old houses, a town square and a small campus, the University of La Verne, that's straight out of a Norman Rockwell illustration, with the addition of a few palm trees.

La Verne police were well aware of the Branch Davidians, who didn't quite fit in, but considered them harmless.

Until they met Robyn Bunds. She had quite a story to tell them.

"I didn't leave out one dirty detail," she said.

Bunds told police that Howell had upward of 15 so-called wives, or the women in the cult with whom he had sex. And some of the wives were underage, she reported to police, including a 14-year-old Australian girl who had become a "wife" a year earlier. Bunds also had been one of Howell's wives, she said.

She believed Howell had kidnapped her son, Shaun, who was then less than 2 years old, and sent him to Mount Carmel, the cult's home base about 10 miles east of Waco.

Howell was the boy's father, Bunds told La Verne police.

The apparent kidnapping came after she had seemingly gotten Howell's blessings to leave the cult, Bunds said.

Howell had pulled her aside a few weeks before at the La Verne house and kissed her. To his surprise, she started crying. He asked what was wrong. She wanted to leave and try to live a normal life, Bunds told him. Mockingly, Howell asked where she would go. Bunds, then 21 years old, threw out the name of a former boyfriend, one she had not seen or heard from in years. It was the only person she could think of.

An angry Howell stormed away, Bunds said.

The next day, after Bunds got off work as a receptionist for a videotape duplication company, she returned to the La Verne house to find all her belongings gone. This was her chance, she reasoned. Howell was saying, in effect, "See if you can make it on your own."

But Howell meant Bunds to start a new life missing more than her belongings.

### Son is gone

Her son, Shaun, or Wisdom as he was called at the time, was also gone. Howell had sent the boy to Texas in the care of Branch Davidian Novlette Sinclair, according to Robyn Bunds and police. Sinclair was one of the women who kept Shaun while his mother worked.

Incensed, Robyn Bunds went to the La Verne Police Department.

Bunds accompanied police to the house on White Avenue. She identified the women she believed to be Howell's wives, including her own mother, Jeannine.

Howell told police what they suspected: Shaun Bunds was not there. He was in Texas.

Sgt. John Hackworth and the other police officers noticed that Howell's voice was trembling. He hardly seemed a foreboding figure, a prophet with the might of God behind him. There was a hint of anger, too, in Howell's face. Hackworth thought he knew why. Howell was no longer in control; the police were. His followers saw him reduced to a mere mortal.

Wanting to put a scare into Howell, La Verne police gave him 48 hours to return Shaun Bunds to California or face kidnapping charges. The media would also be alerted, police said.

Before police left, Howell asked to speak to Robyn Bunds.

"Robyn, you know more than these people," Howell implored.

"Shut up," an officer snapped at Howell. "She's being deprogrammed."

Am I that far gone? a stunned Bunds asked herself.

### 'Like a zombie'

Howell walked around "like a zombie," after police left, Jeannine Bunds said. He couldn't believe that Robyn Bunds had gone to the authorities.

"She stuck a knife in my heart

Please see BUNDS, Page 9A



# BUNDS

## Woman makes a break from cult

□ From Page 8A

and twisted it," Howell said aloud.

Two days later, Shaun Bunds was back home. Police returned to the La Verne house and asked to see the 14-year-old Australian girl. But she had gone to Texas, along with Howell.

"If they had detained her that first night, this would be all over," Robyn Bunds said.

Ingels said the first priority for La Verne police was getting Shaun Bunds back to his mother, not questioning the Australian girl, although the age of consent in California is 18 years old.

"Before we could really investigate, she disappeared," Ingels said. "He left, too. And he didn't come back. I don't think he liked our attention."

Jeannine Bunds left the Branch Davidians a few months after her daughter.

### 'I did believe'

The New Light, Howell's August 1989 pronouncement that all women belonged to him, had always troubled Robyn Bunds. Her mother knew that. For Jeannine Bunds, like her daughter, became Howell's wife, part of the House of David — the women who were to have the children supposedly destined to rule the world with Howell.

"I wanted to be in the House of David," said Jeannine Bunds. "He made it sound so wonderful. I did. I did believe. I couldn't tell you why now."

Howell prophesied that she would become pregnant, even though she was in her early 50s, Jeannine Bunds said. The thought tantalized her.

"The children in the group are so beautiful, they really are," Jeannine Bunds said. "You think, 'These must be God's children. They're so beautiful.'"

But Jeannine Bunds didn't get pregnant. She became even more depressed when her daughter left the cult. Howell exacerbated things by forbidding Jeannine Bunds to talk to her daughter.

Heartbroken, Jeannine Bunds quit her job as a nurse at Providence Health Center and left Waco, leaving Howell a good-bye note.

Her parting with Howell wasn't bitter, but bittersweet.

"Even now, I don't hate him," Jeannine Bunds said. "Even after all he's done to my family. It's hard for me. I've seen both sides of him. He can be nice. He cares about people, or at least he seems to. . . I do have feelings for Vernon. Sometimes they overwhelm me. But all my life, this has been my daughter, my baby, my doll."

Robyn Bunds, in contrast to her mother, has no lingering affection for Howell.

"He has totally changed," Bunds said. "He was really nice. He was humble. He was very well-mannered. Over the years, though, he's lost a lot of those qualities. He's become this obnoxious, foul-mouth, pushy person because of the power he has over these people."

Howell, however, sincerely believes what he teaches, Robyn Bunds said.

"Some people I tell this say he's a con man," she said. "Ah, kinda. But he does believe it."

One member of the Bunds family remains at Mount Carmel. Don Bunds chose Howell over his family. His greatest fear is burning in hell, his wife and daughter said. His family rarely hears from him.

### A cruel irony

Jeannine Bunds sees a cruel irony in losing her husband to religion. Reared a Catholic, she changed faiths to keep her husband.

"Because of this, I really lost my husband," she said. "So what did I accomplish? I just sit back sometimes and it feels like I've been hit by a bomb. I think I should have done this; I should have done that. But it's too late for me. It's too late for my family. It's been blown to smithereens."

She blames herself for her daughter becoming involved with the Branch Davidians and Howell.

As a teen-ager, Robyn Bunds had fled the cult, going to live with relatives in New Bedford, Mass., but she got lonely and asked to come home to California. Howell, though, ordered Robyn Bunds to go to Palestine, Texas, the cult's home base at the time.

Bunds' parents advised her to obey Howell. They didn't know Howell wanted to seduce their daughter, then 17, Jeannine Bunds said.

"If we had had any inkling . . ." Jeannine Bunds said. "When we did find out, we felt very betrayed. I feel like we did her a dirty deal, even though he was very deceptive about what he did."

For herself, Jeannine Bunds offers no excuse.

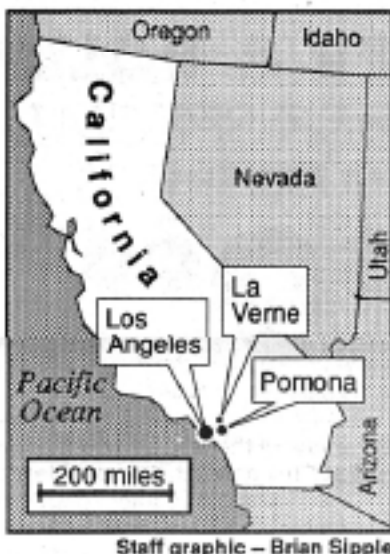
### 'I chose to stay'

"I'm over 21, intelligent," she said. "I could have walked at any time. I chose to stay. He doesn't keep you. You can leave. What you have to understand, though, is he keeps you by emotion. When you're down there, it's all so exciting. You don't know what he'll come up with next. I guess everyone is looking for Utopia, Shangri-la. You don't want any problems. It wasn't all bad times, you know. The people in this are great. They'll give you the shirt off their back. They're nice, like everyone else in the world. Except they believe this."

Jeannine Bunds works two jobs so her daughter can attend Mount San Antonio College, where she is a pre-law major.

They're both trying to start their lives over, but it's impossible for either woman to really forget the past. For one thing, they live in the Pomona house, which Don and Jeannine Bunds bought on Howell's order as a place for the men in the cult to stay while in California. The cult abandoned the house last spring.

But the most telling reminder of the past is Shaun Bunds, now 4, who reminds both Jeannine and Robyn Bunds every day that they once loved the same man.



## Part Seven

### Vernon Howell travels to Australia to reclaim scattered flock; his visit leads to a showdown with Marc Breault

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE MCCORMICK  
c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

Marc Breault didn't set out to lead anyone away from anything. He went to Australia to forget.

It was far away from Vernon Howell and the Branch Davidians, a bizarre spinoff of the Seventh-day Adventists based 10 miles east of Waco. Breault once had counted himself among Howell's most faithful followers.

Now he wanted to start anew with his wife, Elizabeth Baranyai, a native Australian and also a former cult member, and forget the last four years of his life, which he considered wasted.

Eventually, Breault, 29, started his own computer programming company.

But Breault couldn't forget that he had recruited many of Howell's followers. It ate at him. He felt guilty. But how to get anyone out of the cult was a quandary.

Cult members believed Howell was inspired.

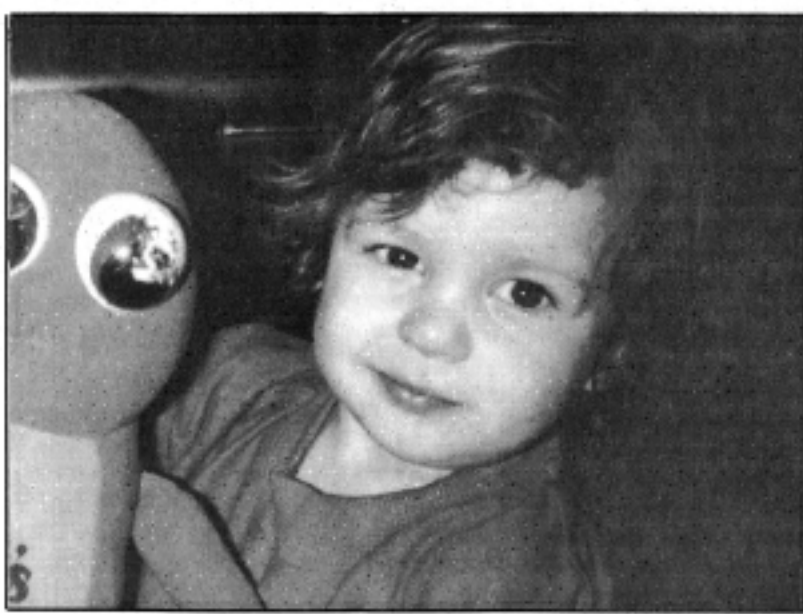
Breault knew that if he went to the Australian cult members, most of whom lived near Melbourne, and said, "Hey, guys, I've been studying my Bible and I can show you where Vernon is wrong," they would not listen. He was one of them.

But Breault did have a moment of inspiration.

The Australian Branch Davidians remembered Breault's dreams, his musings on whether he, too, might be anointed. Howell had tolerated his wonderings. So Breault told the Australians that he, too, was a prophet. And God had given him a revelation.

They agreed to hear Breault out.

Howell claimed to be the Lamb spoken of in the book of Revelation who would reveal the Seven Seals, the catastrophic events



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Shaun Bunds, previously named Wisdom Bunds, is the son of Robyn Bunds. She says Vernon Howell is the boy's father.

heralding the end of the world, didn't he? Only, didn't Howell also say he was Cyrus, the man who would destroy the Babylonians or unbelievers?

Well, Breault said, God had told him that the Lamb was really Jesus Christ. Not Cyrus. And not Vernon Howell.

It was easy to prove, Breault said. He read to them from the New Testament.

John 1:29: *The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.*

Breault's plan worked. One by one, over about a year, many of the Australian followers concluded that Howell was a false prophet. Then Breault disclosed that he wasn't a prophet either.

The Branch Davidians were left with a void where their faith had been.

Howell tried to fill it. He fought back, issuing a revelation of his own. And it was breathtaking.

If the Bible said only the Christ could reveal the Seven Seals, that led to an inescapable conclusion, Howell argued. Had he not shown repeatedly that only he could unveil the baffling language guarding the Seven Seals?

What other explanation was there?

### Dramatic difference

Vernon Howell was Jesus Christ, come again. But this time with a dramatic difference, according to Howell. He was the Sinful Messiah. The first Jesus was pure and sinless. How could he fairly judge anyone, Howell asked.

The Sinful Messiah explained much about Howell to his followers. This Jesus Christ cursed like a sailor and, by his own tongue, admitted lusting after women. And not from afar. The Branch Davidians knew he had taken the most desirable women in the group to bed.

It made a certain kind of sense. Howell initially shied away from publicly acknowledging that he considered himself to be Christ.

"I'd be lying if I said yes," Howell said, in an interview with the *Tribune-Herald*. "I'd be lying if I said no."

But, in another interview, Howell confirmed making the astonishing claim.

"If the Bible is true, I'm Christ," he said. "But so what? What's so great about being Christ? A man nailed to the cross. A man acquainted with grief. You know, being Christ ain't nothing. Know what I mean? . . . If the Bible is true, I'm Christ. If the Bible is true. But all I want out of this is for people to be honest this time."

Breault, however, pointed out the flaw in Howell's claim to be a Christ prone to sin. It doesn't jibe with the Bible.

Hebrews 9: 28 shows as much. *"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation."*

The battle for the souls of the Australian cult members would climax in a showdown between Howell and Breault.

Howell traveled to Melbourne early in 1990, staying at the home of Bruce and Lisa Gent, who like the other Australians had wavered in the face of Howell's claim to be Christ.

Howell's attempt to revive his followers was grueling.

Bruce Gent, a builder, had a project going. At 7 a.m., he went to work. He came home at 6 p.m., showered, then went into Bible studies that lasted from 8 p.m. until long past midnight.

The Australians had heard rumors of the New Light, but Howell had denied it in an audiotape mailed to each of them. In the

Gents' living room, where he could work on the cult members for hours, Howell confirmed that the married men had to find their perfect mates in heaven, Bruce Gent said. Their wives must cleave to Howell.

During the studies, Howell complained that some women who understood the truth of what he was preaching still dared to go to bed with their husbands.

He pointed to the bedroom of Bruce and Lisa Gent.

### Not the Lamb

After several days of round-the-clock Bible studies, Lisa Gent checked into a motel. She studied her Bible and concluded that Howell was not the Lamb. He was not Christ. Gent called her husband, Bruce, and together they asked Howell to leave their home.

Howell moved in with James and Michelle Tom. Michelle Tom is the daughter of Lisa Gent.

Through his confidant, Steve Schneider, Howell called Marc Breault and challenged him to a showdown at the Toms' house for the souls of the Australian followers. Breault came, but asked his brother-in-law to call police if he and his wife, Elizabeth Baranyai, were not home by 10 p.m.

Breault tried to explain why he didn't believe Howell was inspired, but Howell hounded him on one point: who had taught him the Seven Seals? Didn't that prove Howell was the Lamb or Jesus Christ?

"Who taught you, Marc?" Howell asked repeatedly.

During the faceoff, Howell said he was the man on a white horse mentioned in Revelation, the lion of the tribe of Judah, because he was a Leo.

Breault made light of Howell's claim.

Since Howell also claimed to be the man on the black horse with a pair of scales in his hand, did that also mean he was a Libra, he asked.

Irate, Howell began talking as if he were Jesus, not the supposed Jesus of today, the Sinful Messiah, but the Jesus of the New Testament, remembering what it was like when Judas betrayed him. It was something Breault had never heard Howell do. He and Elizabeth left.

Shortly afterward, there was a knock at the door. It was past 10 p.m. A voice said the police were coming. Actually, it was only John Baranyai, worried about his sister and brother-in-law.

Howell, who had just claimed to be the incarnation of Christ, ran out the back door, grabbed a bicycle and pedaled away, leaving his followers on their own.

He left Australia empty-handed.

Breault pursued. He called some of the Branch Davidians living at Mount Carmel, but they refused to accept Breault's argument that Howell was a fraud. It was probably a waste of time to try to reach them, Breault decided. They were too close to Howell.

### One he could rescue

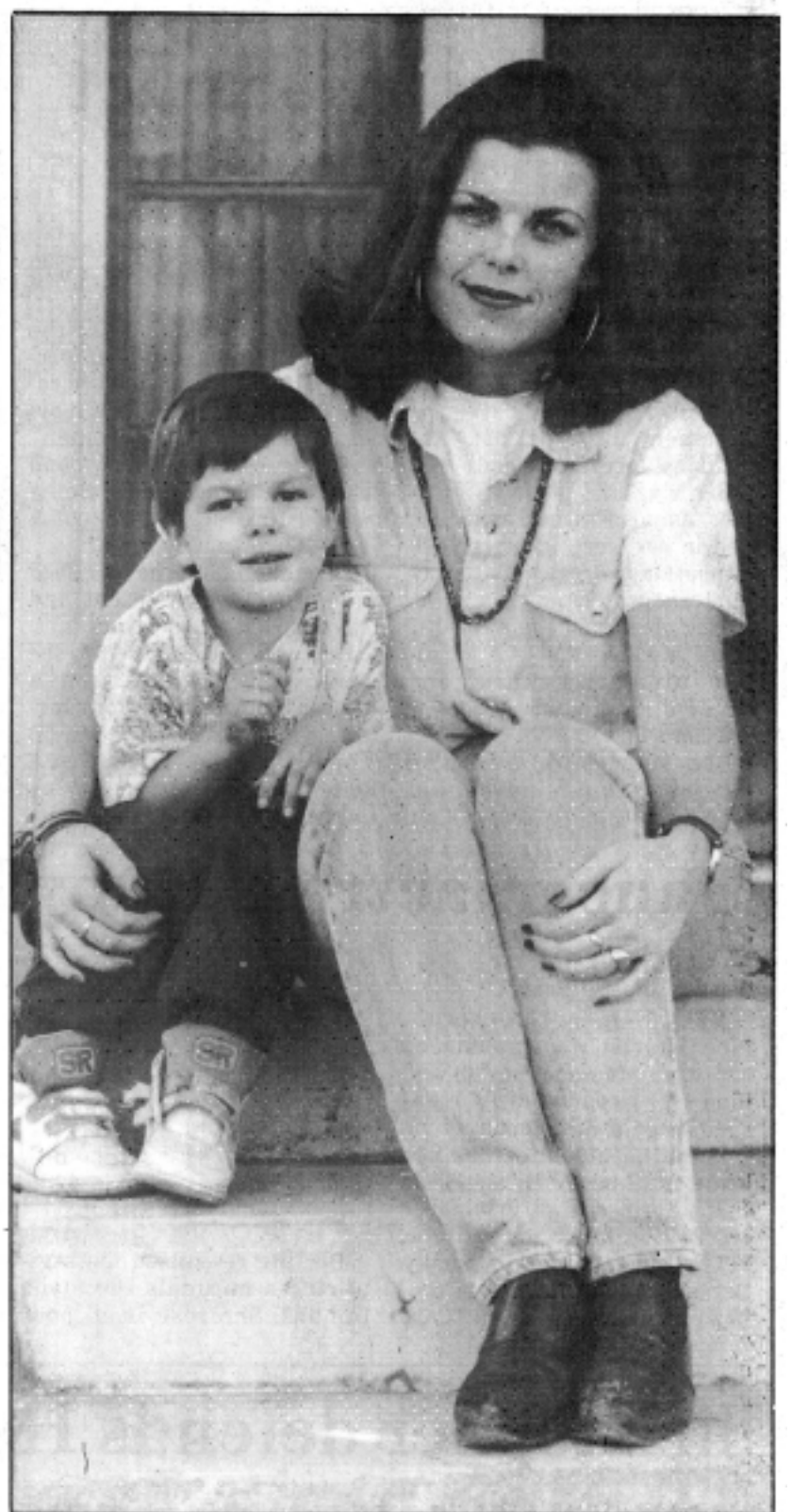
In talking and corresponding with other former cult members, though, Breault came to believe there was one Branch Davidian he could rescue.

She was 10 years old. Her name was Kiri Jewell.

Her mother, Sherri Jewell, was a school teacher who spent much of her free time at the cult's house in La Verne, Calif. Breault had already failed to persuade her that Howell was not Jesus Christ, even though he and his wife had once been close to her. Sherri Jewell was maid of honor at their wedding.

But Kiri Jewell had a father who was not a Branch Davidian.

David Jewell was a disc jockey in South Bend, Ind. He and Sherri Jewell were divorced, but he had



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Larry Crowe photo

Robyn Bunds called in the La Verne police after Vernon Howell sent her son, Shaun (left) from California to Mount Carmel after she left the cult. Bunds told La Verne police that Howell was Shaun's father. Police gave Howell two days to return Shaun or face kidnapping charges. Howell returned the boy and left California.

retained joint custody of his daughter.

In October 1991, Marc Breault called David Jewell. He asked Jewell if he knew whether his daughter ever wore a pendant. Yes, she wore a six-sided star — the Star of David, Jewell said.

Howell had targeted his daughter, Kiri, for the House of David, Breault told Jewell.

David Jewell sued for emergency custody of his daughter when she visited him in Niles, Mich., after Christmas.

The child custody hearing lasted from Feb. 25 to Feb. 28, 1992.

In the mellow tones of his profession, David Jewell told Judge Ronald Taylor in a St. Joseph, Mich. courtroom that he had a bad feeling about the Branch Davidians long before Breault's phone call.

In 1987, Sherri Jewell told him that she wanted to take Kiri to Palestine, Texas, David Jewell testified.

"Sherri told me unless I cooperated with the move, I'd be forever damned to hell," Jewell said. "And if I did cooperate, I would be given more light. That kind of thinking set off alarm bells as to my daughter's well-being."

Breault, Elizabeth Baranyai and Jean Smith all paid their way over from Australia to testify on David Jewell's behalf.

Breault testified he had parted with Howell when he had to "face the reality of his taking young girls."

"Vernon would really emphasize to girls anywhere from 6, 7 on up, 'You should want to be with me,'" Breault said. "This is the ultimate thing. Your whole lives should be directed to this. You should know the Scriptures. You should know what I teach, so when you are ready, you can become one of the people in the House of David."

The attorney for Sherri Jewell asked Breault if he considered himself a prophet — referring to Howell's claim that Breault is a rival prophet.

Breault said that while in the cult he had visions and wondered what they meant.

"We lived, ate and breathed the Bible," Breault testified. "It was the whole center of our being. We would have these long studies. So for me to have dreams and visions about Vernonite theology wouldn't have been uncommon. . . . Basically, I was just brainwashed. I was just out of it."

Jean Smith, 72, testified that she stayed at the La Verne house during a Passover. Men in the cult were not allowed there, ex-

cept with Howell's permission, she said.

"The women in any of those rooms could be called on by Vernon at that stage," Smith said.

Smith called Howell a "straight-out bully."

"I saw him harass Kiri one evening because she didn't know exactly what he thought she should know," Smith said.

Sherri Jewell never testified at the child custody hearing. On the third day, both sides announced to Judge Ronald Taylor that a shared custody agreement had been worked out. One of its conditions was that Kiri be kept away from Howell.

Judge Taylor told Sherri Jewell that it would be "a matter of grave concern" to him if the agreement were violated.

"I think it is very clear on this record that the best interests of Kiri are not at all served by her association with that organization or, most specifically, Mr. Howell or Koresh or whatever his appropriate name is," Judge Taylor said.

Having gotten one more cult member away from Howell, Breault returned to Melbourne.

A programmer, he uses his computer at home to keep in touch with ex-cult members and the families of present cult members. They've fashioned an intelligence network of sorts that attempts to track the Branch Davidians' doings.

### The rock crumbles

The former Australian cult members said they last heard as a group from Howell almost three years ago — after he lit out on a bicycle from the home of James and Michelle Tom.

An earthquake had struck Pomona, 30 miles outside Los Angeles, damaging the house where the men in the cult stayed.

Howell had picked out the house — which Don and Jeannine Bunds bought — because its rock facing reminded him of the Biblical parable to build your house on a rock.

The earthquake crumbled the rock, though, which fell to the ground.

Telephoning the Australians, Howell warned that the earthquake was a sign of God's anger at them for abandoning him.

It was too late for such blustering.

To the Australians, and Breault, if it signaled anything, the falling rock signaled the collapse of the Branch Davidians.

And, they hoped, Vernon Howell.