

‘People of Praise leaders failed me’: Christian group tied to Justice Amy Coney Barrett faces reckoning over sexual misconduct

By Beth Reinhard and Alice Crites

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EDEN PRAIRIE, Minn. — In December, Katie Logan called the police in this Minneapolis suburb to unearth a buried secret: Her high school physics teacher had sexually assaulted her two decades earlier, she said. She was 17 and had just graduated from a school run by a small Christian group called People of Praise. He was 35 at the time, a widely admired teacher and girls’ basketball coach who lived in a People of Praise home for celibate men.

Logan told police she reported the June 2001 incident to a dean at the school five years after it happened. Police records show the dean believed Logan and relayed the complaint to at least one other senior school official.

But the teacher, Dave Beskar, remained at Trinity School at River Ridge until 2011, when he was hired to lead a charter school in Arizona. In 2015, he returned to the Minneapolis area to become headmaster of another Christian school. Beskar denies that any inappropriate sexual activity took place.

“People of Praise leaders failed me,” Logan, 37, said in an interview with The Washington Post. “I think they wanted to protect themselves more than they wanted to protect me and other girls.”

Logan was encouraged to go to police by a founder of “PoP Survivors,” a Facebook group formed last fall after the Supreme Court nomination of Amy Coney Barrett, who has deep roots in People of Praise and who served on the board of its schools years after Beskar left. Barrett’s ascendancy to the nation’s highest court has forced a painful reckoning in People of Praise, an insular Christian community that emphasizes traditional gender roles. The former members are now demanding that the group acknowledge their suffering and that it mishandled complaints, prompting People of Praise to hire two law firms to investigate allegations of abuse.

The Post interviewed nine people in the Facebook group — all but one of them women — who said they were sexually abused as children, as well as another man who says he was physically abused. In four of those cases,

the people said the alleged abuse was reported to community leaders. Logan gave The Post recorded statements and other documents from the police investigation of her complaint.

In response to questions from The Post, Craig Lent, chairman of the religious group's board of governors, said that the lawyers' findings will be reviewed by a People of Praise committee of men and women and that "appropriate action" will be taken.

Lent declined in a written statement to respond to specific questions about Logan's allegation but acknowledged the "serious questions that it raises." He declined to say how many claims are being investigated. "People of Praise has always put the safety of children far above any reputational concerns," said Lent, who is also chairman of the board overseeing three Trinity Schools campuses for middle and high school students — in the Minneapolis area, South Bend, Ind., and Falls Church, Va.

People of Praise grew out of the charismatic Christian movement of the early 1970s, which adopted practices described in the New Testament of the Bible, including speaking in tongues, the use of prophecy and faith healing. The group says it has 1,700 members across the United States, Canada and the Caribbean.

Barrett, who was raised in a People of Praise community in Louisiana, has long been active in the branch in the South Bend area, where she was a student at Notre Dame Law School. Barrett lived for a time with People of Praise co-founder Kevin Ranaghan and his wife, Dorothy, Dorothy Ranaghan has [confirmed](#). A People of Praise 2010 directory shows Barrett served as a "handmaid," a key female adviser to another female member. Barrett served on the Trinity Schools board, whose members must belong to People of Praise, from 2015 to 2017.

Barrett was not asked about People of Praise during her confirmation to the Supreme Court. At her 2017 Senate confirmation hearing for a federal appeals court, she said she would not put her religious beliefs before the rule of law. "It's never appropriate for a judge to impose that judge's personal convictions, whether they derive from faith or anywhere else, on the law," she said.

The #MeToo movement took off that same year, as waves of women increasingly accused powerful men of sexual misconduct. The upheaval reached People of Praise last September, as Barrett was being prominently mentioned for a spot on the Supreme Court. Some former members said they worried that her involvement in the community that failed to protect them might color her views on gender equity and sexual misconduct.

"I am not questioning whether she is a brilliant legal mind," said one former member, Sarah Mitchell Kuehl.

"It's more her association with this repressive organization that worries me and how it will impact her ability to be impartial knowing what I grew up with and the mind-set."

'People were hurt'

Kuehl said she was molested as a young child by a man who was staying with her family in the Minneapolis area in the late 1970s. They were members of Servants of the Light, a charismatic Christian group that merged

with People of Praise in the early 1980s. Both groups' practices include communal living, in which single people often live "in household" with families, and families often reside in clusters.

For years, Kuehl despaired as the man, Gary McAlpin, married, fathered children and participated in People of Praise religious and social gatherings. Her parents raised alarms with People of Praise leaders starting in the late 1980s, according to letters reviewed by The Post.

Kuehl filed a civil claim against McAlpin when she was 17 in 1990. The following year, in a psychological assessment required as part of an agreement to settle the case, he acknowledged abusing a minor in the 1970s roughly 20 times. The assessment, which Kuehl provided to The Post, recommended that McAlpin receive treatment for pedophilia.

Kuehl said McAlpin left the community after refusing the recommended treatment. McAlpin did not respond to messages seeking comment. Lent did not respond to questions about how People of Praise handled the allegation, but said the incidents occurred before the two Christian groups merged.

In 2019, when Kuehl's parents asked to be "released" from their commitment to People of Praise because of the way it handled their daughter's allegation, Lent suggested such abuse was rare. "It may help you to know that I am unaware of any comparable abuse by a household member ever occurring in the People of Praise community," Lent wrote her parents. "That is certainly not to say it could not happen, or that there might be situations unknown to me."

Kuehl, now 48, believed People of Praise needed to do more to accept responsibility. Barrett's rising profile prompted her to write to Lent in September and accuse People of Praise of allowing McAlpin to remain in the community after her parents reported the matter to leadership. Kuehl also told her story to the [Guardian](#).

Lent responded that People of Praise took her concerns seriously and had hired the law firm Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan to investigate. As other former members spoke up, including Logan, another large firm, Lathrop GPM, was hired to look into abuse claims more broadly.

The private Facebook group was created in October by Kuehl's former Trinity classmate Rebecca Grundhofer, who told The Post she was molested as a child by an older boy when their families lived together. Three dozen people who grew up in the branches in the Minneapolis area and South Bend have joined the Facebook group. Several people in the group — including Logan, Kuehl and Grundhofer — have spoken extensively with the lawyers hired by People of Praise. They and others in the group, though, question how determined People of Praise is to find former members who say they were victimized and to hold abusers — and those who mishandled their complaints — to account.

"I am still waiting for them to acknowledge that they didn't act when they should have acted, but instead they give excuses like 'people don't recall the details,' or 'it was so long ago,' or 'how the organization handled abuse was different back then.'" Kuehl said in an interview. "What about saying, 'We failed to act. People were hurt.'"

Among those in the Facebook group is Kevin Connolly, 37, the brother of People of Praise's chief spokesman. Connolly said his father was violent and once kicked him in the face when he was 10, leaving him with a black eye.

His father and brother did not return messages from The Post. His mother, who is now divorced but remains in the community, said she knows her son Kevin to "be a person of integrity."

Connolly said he was raised to stay silent and to forgive rather than accuse, a sentiment shared by others in the Facebook group. "It eventually just became less painful to speak out than to not," said Connolly, a psychology professor in Philadelphia who sought advice on the group's behalf from nationally known advocates for sexual abuse survivors.

Women in the Facebook group recalled childhood warnings from parents and teachers that wearing revealing clothing would tempt the opposite sex. They were responsible for warding off sexual advances from men, the women said they were told.

"For so long, I felt like I did something wrong, and that I should be embarrassed and ashamed," said Grundhofer, 47, who only recently told her parents she was molested around age 4, when her family belonged to Servants of the Light. They joined People of Praise a few years later. "I finally realized I didn't do anything wrong."

People of Praise is led by an all-male board of governors. Younger adults are assigned a "head" of the same sex to guide them on spiritual and secular matters. Husbands typically take over as heads of their wives; wives do not become heads for their husbands.

An article in the summer 2015 issue of People of Praise's magazine, based on a speech given years earlier by Jeanne DeCelles, wife of co-founder Paul DeCelles, advised wives to verbalize to their husbands a "commitment to submission" and to "make it a joy for him to head you."

Asked about the way People of Praise treats female members, Lent said: "Men and women share a fundamental equality as bearers of God's image and sons and daughters of God."

'Inappropriate pattern of behavior'

Inspired by Kuehl, Logan called her hometown police department on New Year's Eve 2020. Logan's account to police matched what later she told The Post:

She said that, as a student at Trinity School at River Ridge, she had a crush on Beskar. Two weeks after she graduated, he showed up at her house while her parents were out of town. She was 17 at the time, records show.

Logan answered the door in a Wonder Woman T-shirt and ripped jeans. Beskar said he needed to use the family's computer, and did so for several hours. Then they sat on the porch, drank beer and talked. Logan felt flattered by the attention.

Beskar came back to the next day and used the computer again. But this time he sat down next to her on the couch, pressed against her and unbuttoned her pants, she said. He inserted his finger into her vagina, she alleged.

She said she was in shock for maybe a minute, then said something like, "Okay, I think that's enough." She said she tried to minimize the awkwardness of the moment and get him out of the house.

In hindsight, she believed Beskar had groomed her for years, becoming close to her family and having dinner at her house several times. "Boundaries just get broken down," she told police.

Over the next couple of years, Logan told two close friends and her parents. They all confirmed to both The Post and the police that Logan had told them about the incident with Beskar.

Beskar did not respond to phone messages from The Post. He asked a reporter who came to his home to leave. "Nothing physical ever happened between Katie and I," Beskar told police on Feb. 25, according to an audio recording of his interview. "I want to be just really clear about that. Nothing sexual."

Logan said that in 2006 she called the school's highest-ranking woman, Dean of Girls Penny Arndt, and told her about Beskar.

Arndt did not respond to messages from The Post seeking comment.

Arndt, who recently retired, told police she believed that the call was made a year or two later and that Logan said she was 18 at the time of the incident. "He put his hands down the front of her pants, and then she said no," Arndt said, recounting the call. She added, "I took her at her word."

Arndt told police that another female student said Beskar made her uncomfortable but that she dismissed that complaint, saying "teenagers and tears kind of go hand in hand." Arndt noted that she technically reported to Beskar, who was then an associate headmaster.

Arndt told police she relayed Logan's accusation to the president of the Trinity Schools board at the time, Kerry Koller. She said she didn't know what, if any, action Koller took. He died last year.

Arndt said that in 2009 she reported the allegation to new headmaster Jon Balsbaugh "so that it didn't fall by the wayside because Dave was still there," according to an audio recording of her police interview.

Balsbaugh told police that he did not learn of Logan's complaint until Beskar had left the school in 2011.

Balsbaugh said that after the parent of a basketball player complained that Beskar made girls on the team uncomfortable, he asked Arndt if she knew of any other concerns about the coach. She told him about Logan, he said.

Balsbaugh told police he thought Logan was 18 at the time of the “inappropriate advances” and that therefore no crime had occurred.

The parent’s concern is mentioned in an “internal confidential report” Balsbaugh compiled after Beskar’s departure, which police obtained through a search warrant. The Post obtained the undated report and other documents from Beskar’s personnel file.

Balsbaugh wrote that he told the parent that players should come talk to him about their concerns. He dropped the matter when none did.

Balsbaugh wrote that, after Beskar left the school, he learned of three other allegations — the report does not name the women — that the teacher made female students uncomfortable.

“In none of these incidents does Mr. Beskar appear to have acted illegally, though this does seem to be an inappropriate pattern of behavior in a person with responsibility for the care of students,” Balsbaugh wrote.

Arndt and Balsbaugh also mentioned to police their concerns about Beskar’s relationship with a former student who was 22 years younger than him. She became his assistant basketball coach after her graduation. They married in 2014. She did not respond to messages from The Post.

The Arizona charter school organization that hired Beskar in 2011 to create new schools never asked for his employment record, Balsbaugh told police. Great Hearts Academies, based in Phoenix, declined to comment. In a statement to The Post, Balsbaugh, now president of the Trinity Schools board, said: “Trinity School takes the well-being of students under our care very seriously. We are grieved that Ms. Logan or any student would have had to shoulder the burden of the experience she relates.”

Police also interviewed Joel Kibler, who served on the board of governors until last year and is the president of the group of celibate men, the Brotherhood. He told police that after Beskar moved to Arizona three female students and a mother of two daughters said the teacher had made them feel uncomfortable. “He was one of the most widely respected people in the People of Praise group. People looked up to him,” Kibler said, adding later, “I was surprised, but I had no reason to doubt these girls.”

Kibler told The Post in a statement that he reported the complaints to the school, deeming it “a Trinity school matter to handle.”

When police asked Beskar if he had ever been confronted with allegations of sexual misconduct by a school, he said, “No, never,” according to a recording of the interview. Beskar’s personnel file contains no indication that school officials ever spoke to him about alleged misconduct or urged him to leave. On the contrary, it shows officials expressed alarm about Beskar breaking his contract midyear to leave for Arizona.

Police in Eden Prairie recommended charging Beskar with a felony, criminal sexual conduct in the third degree, in which a victim between 16 and 18 years old is penetrated by an older authority figure, records show.

Prosecutors in surrounding Hennepin County decided they could not charge Beskar. The law in 2001 did not consider a former teacher an authority figure. The statute of limitations at that time also precluded filing charges today, said Chuck Laszewski, a spokesman for the Hennepin County attorney's office.

"We were looking hard for a way to bring a prosecution," he said. "We found her very credible."

'Very strict code'

In recent months, Logan has been torn between feelings of betrayal by People of Praise leadership and gratitude for members who have long supported her mother during chronic illnesses. A measure of vindication arrived in late May when Chesterton Academy of the Twin Cities, the school where Beskar has been headmaster since 2015, announced that he was taking an indefinite leave of absence because of an allegation of misconduct that occurred two decades ago. The school had been recently informed about Logan's allegation.

Lathrop GPM attorney Robin Maynard, a former sex crimes prosecutor leading the People of Praise investigation, was present for the police department's interviews with community leaders. In a private conversation with the police detective after Balsbaugh's interview, the tape still running, Maynard described the challenge of rooting out wrongdoing in the tightly knit Christian community.

"They have a very strict code about gossip and about ever saying bad about somebody," Maynard said, according to an audio file obtained by The Post. "One thing I found is that it's a little hard to drag information out because they are very conscientious."

Asked about Maynard's remark, Lent said: "People of Praise believes it is entirely appropriate and necessary to disclose information about abuse and serious misconduct to appropriate authorities in our community and in broader society, for the sake of protecting children and others. Such responsible reporting in no way constitutes gossip."

In an email to The Post, Maynard declined to comment on her statement about the difficulty of investigating People of Praise.